WILLIAM · MORRIS

A · CRITICAL · STUDY · BY

JOHN · DRINKWATER

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WILLIAM MORRIS

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William Morris.

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WILLIAM MORRIS

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

JOHN DRINKWATER

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POEMS OF MEN AND HOURS, 1911

COPHETUA. A Play in One Act, 1911

POEMS OF LOVE AND EARTH, 1912

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TO

ERNEST NEWMAN

Who Loves the Arts

With a Just and Fine Impatience

NOTE

A FEW paragraphs in this book are reprinted, by permission of Messrs. George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., from introductions written for The Muses' Library; others, by permission of the Editor, from articles contributed to *The Nation*.

My thanks are due to William Morris's Trustees for permission to use such quotations from his works as I wished, and to Miss May Morris for her generous assistance in this and other matters. My indebtedness to Mr. Mackail I have acknowledged in more than one place in the body of this volume, but I should like here to emphasize my appreciation of the service that he has done to all who reverence Morris and his work.

I would also thank my friend, Mr. Oliver W. F. Lodge, for the many delightful hours that I have spent with him in talking of a poet whom we both love. What understanding I may have of Morris has been deepened and quickened by his enthusiasm and fine judgment. No thanks

that I might offer to another friend could be in any way adequate; in inscribing this book to him I can but make slight acknowledgment of one of those whole-hearted services that stand for so much in the craft of letters.

J. D.

Birmingham, 1912.

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I

INTRODUCTORY

To the isolation, the loneliness, of the poet, criticism is apt to give far less than due heed. At a time when literature is daily becoming more responsive to the new spirit which we call Democracy, such a complaint may seem to be reactionary in temper, and some explanation may be made by way of defence against any such possible charge. Nothing is more disastrous to a poet than that he should dissociate his art from the life of the world; until the conflict and destiny of humanity have become the subjects of his contemplation he cannot hope to bring to his creation that vitality which alone makes for permanence. Ultimately it is the great normal life of mankind which is immortal, and the perishable things are the grotesque, the odd, the experiences which are incomplete because they are unrelated to the general experience. But whilst the insistence that the poet should be swiftly responsive to the life about him is perfectly just, indeed inevitable

in any right understanding of art, it is equally necessary to remember always that the poet's vision itself is turned upon life from places remote and untrodden, that the seasons of his contemplation are seasons of seclusion. To say that the poet is the product of his age is to be deceived by one of the most dangerous of critical half-truths. The poet is the product of his own temperament and personality, or he is nothing. Clearly, if the age in which the poet lived were in any wide sense his creator, the poets of an age would bear unmistakable tokens of their relationship. The perfectly obvious fact that they do not do so is, however, no obstacle to the criticism that wishes to satisfy its own primary assumption that with the age does remain this supreme function of making its own poets. Recognizing that its theory demands the presence of such affinity in its support, this criticism proceeds, in violation of the most direct evidence, to discover the necessary likeness. Perhaps the crowning achievement of this ineptitude is the constant coupling of the names of Tennyson and Browning. If ever two poets were wholly unrelated to each other in their reading of life and spiritual temper, they were the poets of "In Memoriam" and "Pippa Passes," of "Crossing the Bar" and "Prospice." But the accident of their being contemporaries is taken as sufficient

reason for endless comparisons and complacent decisions as to their relative greatness, leading nowhere and establishing nothing. And parallel cases are common enough: Gray and Collins, Shelley and Keats, and, in daily practice, any one poet and any other whose books happen to be on the table at the same moment.

The relation of the age to its poets is that of sunlight to a landscape. The trees and the rivers, the hills and the plains, all turn to the same source for the power whereby to express themselves, the same light is upon them all. But no one thinks in consequence of comparing Snowdon with the Thames. Without his age a poet cannot speak, but the thing that his age empowers him to utter is that which is within him. His song, if it be a song of worth, is a manifestation apart from the age, from everything whatever save his own spiritual distinction. In this sense the poet must always be isolated and lonely, and it is solely by divining the secrets of this isolation and loneliness, not concerning itself unduly with circumstantial kinship in expression that may exist between one poet and another, that criticism may justify itself. Occasionally a poet may arise whose faculty has a vital sympathy with another's, whose vision may accord in some measure with that of one perhaps centuries dead. Then enquiry as to the

affinity is likely to be fruitful. The poet is not so much a reflection of his age as a commentary upon it and its attitude towards life. Twenty poets may be writing together, the age reacting upon their creative energy in every instance, but it is more than probable that the essential significance of their work will be alike in no two cases. So that in writing about Morris my purpose is chiefly to discover what are the aim and ultimate achievement of his artistic activity; in a smaller degree to ascertain what was his relation to his age; to compare him with his contemporary creators scarcely at all, believing such comparisons to be misguided in intention and negative in result.

To attempt a new definition of poetry is a task sufficiently uninviting. And yet it is well to be clear in one's own mind, or as clear as possible, as to what one is writing about. If I try to set down, with as little vagueness as may be, the nature of my conception of the meaning of poetry, I do so in all humility, not in any way suggesting that here at last the eternal riddle has been solved, but merely to define the point from which I start, the standard which I have in mind. It is certain that each man of intelligence and fine feeling will make his own demand as to the values of poetry. A man's worship is directed at last by his needs, and it is as vain in

art as in life to seek to impose a love where there is no corresponding receptivity, assuming, of course a quick intelligence and not one stupefied. A man spiritually asleep may be awakened, but once awake his adventures must be chiefly controlled by himself. Fitzgerald was a man of taste and understanding, but he did not care for Homer and found *The Life and Death of Jason* 'no go.' Arnold was as passionate a man as might be in his allegiance to art, notwithstanding the somewhat false report bestowed upon him by his so-called classicism, and we know his estimate of Shelley and of Byron, whilst Swinburne would have denounced him with equal vigour for his indifference on the one hand and his commendation on the other. These differences do not, of course, diminish the value of critical opinion, they merely point to the futility of attempting to find any common touchstone, and counsel a wise humility and tolerance. That Arnold and Swinburne demanded different things in poetry reflects to the discredit of neither. All men who care for the arts are pledged to refuse the false, the mean, and the vulgar at all seasons; but they do well to remain silent in the presence of things which they know to be none of these yet find themselves unable to love. Without this love criticism is ineffectual. Macaulay in

writing of Montgomery merely antedated the ruin of a reputation by a decade or two; in writing of Milton he helped in the discipline of our understanding. Morris is for me among the supremely important poets, but I know that to some men to whose powers of perception I bow he is not of such vital significance. I do not dispute their conclusions; I can only endeavour to explain and justify my own.

Poetry seems to me to be the announcement of spiritual discovery. Experience might be substituted for discovery, for every experience which is vital and personal is, in effect, a discovery. The discovery need not be at all new to mankind; it is, indeed, inevitable that it will not be so. Nor need it be new to the poet himself. To every man spiritually alive the coming of spring is an experience recurrent yet always vital, always a discovery. Nearly every new poet writes well about the spring, just as every new poet writes well about love. So powerful is the creative impulse begotten by these experiences that it impels many men to attempt utterance without any adequate powers, and so the common gibes find their justification. But it is absurd to pronounce against the creative impulse itself whilst condemning the inefficient expression. The bad love poetry of the world is excluded from my definition not because it is

unconcerned with discovery, but because it is not, in any full sense, an announcement. The articulation is not clear. And by reason of this defect a great deal of other writing which has behind it a perfectly genuine impluse is excluded also. On the other hand, much verse which has a good deal of perfection in form perishes, is, indeed, never alive, because its reason has been something other than spiritual discovery. But whenever these things are found together, the discovery and the announcement, then is poetry born, and at no other time. The magnitude of the poet's achievement depends on the range of his discovery and the completeness of his announcement. If I add that verse seems to me to be the only fitting form for poetry, I do so with full knowledge that weighty evidence and valuable opinion are against me. Nevertheless the term prose-poem seems to be an abomination. The poet in creation, that is to say the poet in the act of announcing spiritual discovery, will find his utterance assuming a rhythmical pattern. The pattern may be quite irregular and flowing, but unless it is discernible the impulse is incomplete in its effect. To think of the music of verse as merely an arbitrary adornment of expression is wholly to misunderstand its value. It is an integral part of expression in its highest manifestation. It is in itself expression. There

is an exaltation at the moment of discovery which is apart from the discovery itself, a buoyancy as of flight. The significance of this exaltation is indefinable, having in it something of divinity. To the words of poetry it is given to announce the discovery; to the music to embody and in some inadequate measure translate the ecstasy which pervades the discovery. The poet's madness is happily not a myth; for to be mad is to be ecstatic.

A poet who in rather more than a generation had produced a small volume of exquisite work complained that a poet's greatness was too often measured by the bulk of his activity. Examination of the nature of the poet's function shows the complaint to be groundless. A man may indeed be immortal by virtue of a stanza if not of a single line. Edward Dyer's report could ill bear the loss of 'My mind to me a kingdom is.' And Martin Tupper passes with his interminable jingles safely into oblivion. But if a man is truly possessed of the poetic fire, we must accept as no negligible measure of his greatness not only the force with which it burns, but also the frequency. Dr. Johnson came nearer to the truth than is generally admitted when he said that the poet who had to wait for 'inspiration' was in a bad way. He was not altogether right, for in practice it is possible for

the poet to lose his technical cunning for long periods, which really amounts to saying that there are times when the spiritual discovery is unaccompanied by the ecstatic exaltation. But he based his pronouncement on sound sense, as was his habit. What he meant was that a poet, before he could lay just claim to high rank, must so discipline himself to disentangle the significant from the insignificant in life as it presented itself to him day by day, that he should never be at a loss for something to say, that he should not have to wait for the event. Milton was not careless in his use of words, and when he said, 'I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrated of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem . . . not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy,' he revealed the secret of the poet's necessity with perfect precision. The greater and more vital the poet, the less will he look upon his poetry as a casual incident of his life, the more will it become for him the impassioned and refined expression of his life in its entirety. Many men turn from the claims of their daily life to art as a recreation. This is far better than having no concern with art at all, but it is

at best but a compromise. In reading a great poet we feel that here is a man to whom art and life are coincident, inseparable. In other words, that he is a man vitally curious about life in all its essential aspects, just as another man will be curious about market prices or electrical development; and just as they must by nature give daily expression to their curiosity about those relatively trivial things, so must he by nature strive to give daily expression to his curiosity about that supremely important thing. And as their constant preoccupation with those ephemeral matters will from time to time bear fruit in the shape of some weighty decision as to a course of action or the evolution of some new design and its application, so will his constant preoccupation with the permanent manifestations of life from time to time bear fruit as a creation of art—as a poem.

Throughout a life of phenomenal artistic energy, Morris never for a moment failed to realize this supreme requirement of the poet's being. He was pre-eminent in many activities, but it is upon his poetry that his reputation will ultimately depend, for in his poetry, inevitably, is found his clearest challenge to oblivion. Had he not written at all he would still have been a remarkable and memorable man, but having written much, and as poet, his claim as such must

be considered before all others. And Morris's poetry is a permanent record of the man's temper, of his spiritual adventures and discoveries, not a desultory series of impressions imposed by external events, but the continuous manifestation of his reading of life. His conception of art, formed in his youth, as the expression of joy in living, as the immediate and necessary outcome of life itself wherever life was full, knew no change to the end. Art was this always to him, and it had no other value. Nothing made by man's hand or brain had any beauty in his eyes unless it expressed this intensity of life which went to its creation. The talk about art for art's sake would have been merely unintelligible to him, because the existence of art apart from life was inconceivable.

William Morris was born at Walthamstow on the 24th of March, 1834. The external record of his life has been given finally by Mr. J. W. Mackail in his *Life*, a book which, besides being a storehouse upon which all writers on Morris must draw and remain thankful debtors, is certainly one of the most beautiful biographies in the language. The wisdom of childhood is sometimes supposed to lie in the child's attitude of unquestioning acceptance, but the truth is that it lies in a constant sense of adventure. The wisdom of the poet is as the child's in this; for

both wake daily in the hope and expectancy of new revelations. Unquestioning acceptance and the stifling of curiosity are the last infirmities of foolish minds. Life ceases to be lovely when it ceases to be adventurous. Morris in his boyhood was rich in a full measure of this wisdom of childhood, and by a fortunate circumstance his earliest days were spent in surroundings that gave ample opportunity for the development of his nature. If he owed his creativeness to nothing but his own endowment, the colour and atmosphere with which his work came to be suffused were largely influenced by the memory of days spent among the hornbeam thickets of the Essex woodlands and the meadows of Woodford, on the fringe of Epping Forest, the Morris family moving to Woodford Hall when the poet was six years old. By this time he was, we hear, already 'deep in the Waverley novels,' and in this connection we have the authority of one of his sisters for a circumstance that is curiously prophetic of a quality that was to mark his life-work. 'We never remember his learning regularly to read.' This instinctive acquisition of knowledge was not the least remarkable of Morris's faculties. He seemed always to understand the things he loved without taking thought. In the practical application of his knowledge no labour was too great; when he wanted to re-establish

the art of dyeing, he spent weeks working at the vats in Leek; when he was directing the Kelmscott Press, whole pages would be rejected for a scarcely visible flaw; when he wished to furnish his house he found little enough in the market to satisfy his conscience, and so became a manufacturer; when he was drawn to the stories of the North he worked unweariedly with an Icelandic scholar and made two pilgrimages—no light undertakings in those days—to the home of his heroes. Miss May Morris in one of her admirable introductions to the complete edition of her father's works, tells us that he once said, 'No man can draw armour properly unless he can draw a knight with his feet on the hob, toasting a herring on the point of his sword.' It is easy to understand that he never learnt to read, for learning by any laborious process was foreign to his nature; knowledge of the things that were of importance to him was in some obscure way born in him. He would spare no pains to shape his knowledge into a serviceable instrument, but the knowledge itself was inherent in him. He moved among the men of the Sagas, of Greek mythology and the old romances, as intimately as we ordinarily move among the people of the house. Many of his friends give independent testimony to the fact that he never seems to have learnt deliberately

of these men; his knowledge of them grew as his knowledge of speech and the ways about him. In considering his work in detail, the value of this instinctive familiarity will be apparent; it brings a sense of reality into his stories as could nothing else. We are hardly ever given laboured details of environment or appearance—merely a few casual strokes of suggestion that, by their very assurance and implication of knowledge, both on the part of the poet and of his reader, carry conviction. For this reason we never feel ourselves to be in strange surroundings or listening to strange men, and it is this privilege of close association with the world of the poet's fashioning that enables us to realize how accessible is that larger and clearer life of which he sings.

Throughout his life not only the beauty but the homeliness, the fellowship, of earth was a passion with him, and to the Woodford Hall days and the rambles over the downs and through Savernake, when a little later he was one of the earliest Marlborough boys, may be traced the beginnings of this strain in his temper. In a famous passage in his biography Mr. Mackail tells us how the boy, dressed in a suit of toy armour, used to ride through the park; how he and his brothers used to shoot red-wings and fieldfares in the winter holidays and roast them

—before a log fire we may be sure—for their supper; how he longed to shoot pigeons with a bow and arrow; how to the end of his life he carried with him recollections of stray sounds and sights and scents of those childhood days; how he would pore over the brasses and monuments that he discovered in the churches near to his home. It is doubtful whether anyone who has not spent some part of his early life in a countryside which has none of the striking beauties that make a landscape famous, that is, in the common phrase, uneventful, can quite realize the meaning of all this. In such surroundings a peculiar intimacy with the earth is born, a nearness to the change of season and the nature and moods of the country, which form a background of singular values in the whole of a man's later development. A man nurtured among the more majestic manifestations of natural beauty will, if he be a poet, in all probability translate his early impressions into single memorable passages, but the effect of environment such as that in which Morris's childhood was passed is of another kind. The whole of Morris's work is coloured and sweetened by a tenderness for earth which, while it does not fail to find at times direct expression of exquisite loveliness, is nevertheless a pervasive mood rather than a series of isolated impressions. It

is this circumstance that came to give quite common words an unusual significance in his poetry. When he speaks of 'the half-ploughed field' or 'the blossomed fruit trees' or 'the quivering noontide haze' or 'the brown bird's tune' or 'the heavy-uddered cows,' or simply 'the meadows green,' the whole of his passionate earth-worship is thrown up with clear-cut intensity and his utterance takes on a value which is wholly unexplained by the mere words of his choice.

At Marlborough the poet's independence of character was already shown. The school-games had no attraction for him. Birds'-nesting, excursions to outlying churches and ruins, explorations of any early remains of which he could discover the whereabouts, long walks accompanied by the improvisation of endless stories of knightly adventure, the reading of any books of romance, archæology and architecture that came to his hand—these were his chief occupations. Before he left the school, his father died, and the family again moved, this time to Water House at Walthamstow. Here again the boy found full store upon which to indulge his imaginative bent. A broad moat, a great paved hall, a wooded island, wide marshlands, all fitted well with the tendencies that had already asserted themselves. When he left

Marlborough at the age of seventeen, there was nothing to show that he was to become a great creative artist, but there was everything to show the atmosphere in which his work would be conceived in such an event. After reading with a private tutor for a year, Morris went up to Oxford at the beginning of the Lent term in 1853.

Tennyson had established his reputation with the issue of the two volumes of "Poems" in 1842. Since then he had published "The Princess" in 1847, and "In Memoriam" in 1850, and was already generally acknowledged as a great new voice in poetry. Browning with "Pauline" in 1833, "Paracelsus" in 1835, "Strafford" in 1837, and the series of plays that followed, had proved his authenticity, but had not yet gained the general recognition that was to be brought a little nearer by the "Dramatic Lyrics" and "Dramatic Romances" of 1842 and 1845, and "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" in 1850. "Men and Women" was not yet published. Clough and Arnold had lately printed their first books, and seven years were to pass before Swinburne's name was to appear on a title-page. Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel" had been printed in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine, "The Germ," but save for a few contributions to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine

his poetry was to wait until 1870 before being given to the public. In prose the influence of the teachings of Carlyle and Ruskin was dominating criticism and æsthetic thought throughout the country, whilst the religious unrest and scientific revaluation, that were to leave their witness to posterity in the work of men so far removed from each other in temper as Newman and Darwin, and Arnold and Clough, were forcing a full share of men's attention to the consideration of abstract ideas.

To determine the exact measure of the influence that the varied expressions of an age's intellectual process exercises upon any single mind belonging to that age is difficult to the point of impossibility. Maeterlinck, in saying that the soul of the peasant would not be what it is to-day had Plato or Plotinus, of whom he has never heard, not lived, endorses the precise truth that Shelley uttered when he said that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The influence of one mind on another is one of the subtlest questions of psychology, and the attempt to trace with any precision the responsiveness of creative genius at all points to the mental movement about it is vain. It would be rash to say that the author of "The Origin of Species" had no influence on the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, as it certainly would be impos-

sible to define what that influence was. Darwin and the Tractarians, the puzzled questionings of the sceptics and the conflicting voices of assertion and confutation, no doubt meant little enough as such to Morris when he went up to Oxford. But they were none the less manifestations of the age that shaped his power of expression, and in a negative and indirect way at least they had a share in his development. The limits of the influence of any commanding creative or speculative mind cannot be laid down. The most romantic poet writing to-day would be witless to assert that he was wholly uninfluenced by, say, Mr. Bernard Shaw or Mr. Balfour, for, whether he realizes the fact or not, these men form part of the intellectual atmosphere in which he is writing. It is a common charge against Morris that he alienated himself, as a poet, from the questions that were troubling his time, as though the poet's theme should undergo continual change with the generations. All experience is emphatic in its assertion of the folly of this attitude. Nothing is more dangerous to the poet than to be in too close contact with the immediate questions of the moment, for, broadly considered, the things of immediate importance are the unimportant things. Much of our finest creative energy to-day is being exhausted in the consideration of problems that

are local and temporary, not fulfilling its creative function with proper completeness, being, rather, bravely destructive, an office honourable enough but not that of the poet's supreme distinction. Morris, from the moment of his earliest artistic consciousness, was perfectly clear as to this matter. He was not at any time deaf to the clamour that came from all sides, nor was he indifferent to it. But he found it partly incomprehensible, partly unlovely, and partly negative, and he turned away from it, not as in retreat from a thing that he feared, but in the search for the life which it was unable to offer. The challenge and counter-challenge of the prophets of the millennium and confusion worse confounded, the disputations of the two-and-seventy jarring sects were not outside the range of Morris's consciousness, but he was content at first to leave them to their own issues. The socialism that was to enter so largely into his later life was not the result of a sudden access of new feeling, but a further expression, in perfectly logical development, of the mental and spiritual outlook that was substantially unchanged from the first. The new expression, when it forced itself upon him, was, indeed, not unconnected with a negative and destructive programme, but it was in reality no more than an attempt to realize the world that he had

created in his art, the world that contained for him the only possible life consistent with free beauty and joy. But, with whatever energy he threw himself into the new work when it came, he never for a moment allowed it to shake his artistic creed.

Nothing is further from the truth than the common assertion that Morris in his art turned from a life of realities to a dream-world, if by a dream-world is meant, and I can apply no other meaning, a world intangible, unrealizable, and remote from practical considerations. We have seen that the earth was to Morris from boyhood in some sort a sacred thing. And the people of the earth were no less. His one overmastering passion was for a world wherein men and women lived in full responsiveness to the beauty of the earth, labouring with their hands and adventurous and capricious in spirit, finding joy in their work and in contact with each other, and rejecting all the things of civilization that were dulling and mechanical. To object that in a commercial civilization so superficially complex —the complexity is really a thing without the subtlety of humanity in it, relatively fixed and reducible to exact formulæ—this passion was in effect no more than a rather futile dream, might be reasonable if Morris himself had not wholly answered the objection in his work. He found

people not only indifferent to the loveliness of earth, but destroying it on every hand; not only forgetting the joy of labour, but debasing it into a daily burden; measuring the value of all work not by the meaning of the work and the spiritual satisfaction that it brought but by the wage that it earned, and fettered in all their relations to each other by countless considerations imposed by external conditions that were not essential factors in humanity, but the whims of a social scheme that mastered men instead of being their servant. From the first he realized that out of such a life no supreme art could spring; the material that they offered was ugly and devitalized, and art can only accept for its service material beautiful and strong. The world as he found it was fettered and numbed, and he sought in his art to create a world free and exultant, one peopled by perfectly normal people whose sorrows were the sorrows of common experience and whose sins were the expression merely of the darker, but not diseased, passions of humanity. When active socialism became part of his work, his sole purpose was, in his own words, to make socialists, which meant, for Morris, to bring men to a sense of the possibility of the life of large simplicity that he had created as poet. His practice and experiments in handicraft and manufacturing process were all

experiments of the same spirit; throughout his many-sided activities an extraordinary unity of intention can be clearly traced. Morris at the loom, or decorating a page, or riding his pony through the Icelandic fords, or proving colours in the vats, or moving among the haymakers in the Kelmscott meadows, was but one of the men with whom he peopled his stories. He wanted all men to attain to this same joyous energy, and the fierce denunciations and charges of his socialistic days were no more than another expression of this desire.

At Oxford the good beginnings of Woodford Hall and Savernake were given every opportunity to develop. He found himself associated with men whose ideals and enthusiasms were as his own. He went into residence in the same term as Edward Burne-Jones, and quickly laid the foundations of a lifelong friendship of more than common loyalty. It is usual to speak regretfully of the growth of modern Oxford. The mediæval town has, indeed, surrounded itself with reaches of quite unlovely slums and suburbs giving just reason for the regret. But, as was said in reply to one who was deploring the vulgarities which have been carried into modern Venice, 'Exactly, but what else in the world is there like it?' Oxford has suffered a change, but in Oxford there are yet survivals scarcely to

be found elsewhere in England. The quadrangles, the bye-streets that curl between the colleges and churches, the succession of spires and grey walls, still preserve unbroken a tradition that goes back to the days when men lived, or so Morris believed, as the men of whom he sang. And in 1853 the tradition, if not clearer, was less threatened by opposing interests than it is to-day. With the scholastic discipline, or lack of it, at Oxford in his time Morris had little or no concern, but he could have found no place more fitting in which to shape his imaginative powers. With Burne-Jones and others of his friends he spent many priceless hours determining all things in heaven and earth with the fine certainty of youth, reading mediæval chronicles and Thorpe's "Northern Mythology," exploring the enchanted worlds of the poets and stirred to new enthusiasms by the latest word of Ruskin or the newly-discovered revelation of some prophet of an older day. Architecture had already taken its place in his mind as one of the noblest of the expressions of man's exultation in his work, and the intention which he had at this time of entering the church was manifestly inspired rather by ecclesiastical art than by any doctrine or dogma. The long vacations of 1853 and 1854 he spent in visiting the churches of England and Northern France, and in making

his first acquaintance with the work of Van Eyck and Memling and Dürer. In painting, as in the other arts, he looked already for the grave yet vigorous simplicity, and that sense of the profound seriousness of joy that were to be the essential characteristics of his own work. His love for mediævalism was neither accident nor the fruit of any refusal to face his own age. It was the logical outcome of this intense conviction that most of the men about him were exhausting their energies and deadening their faculties in the conduct of trivial and inessential things. In the records of the mediæval spirit, in its art, he found the temper which more clearly than any other was at once a warning and a corrective to this wastage. A year spent at Oxford in the company of men who shared his enthusiasms had sharpened his imagination and quickened his creative instinct. He was now ready for Malory and Chaucer and the revelation of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites. With a perfectly defined ideal already developed in his consciousness, he was beginning to write. It only needed contact with these new influences to make his utterance certain and invest the ideal with artistic expression.

When in 1855 he came of age, Morris found himself the possessor of an annual income of £900, the result of a fortunate business transac-

tion made by his father a short time before he died. Burne-Jones had already announced, in a letter to a friend, his intention of forming a 'Brotherhood,' the purpose of which, shared by Morris among others, was, of course, nothing less than the regeneration of mankind. Sir Galahad was to be the patron of the order, the nature of which was to be a strange blending of social activity and monastic seclusion. The scheme in detail—if it ever reached so advanced a stage—passed into the splendid story of youthful enthusiasms, but its principal projectors never wavered in their loyalty to its spirit. To a man so fired, the possession of £900 a year was a responsibility not to be lightly considered. It left him free to choose his course, and it was an integral part of his faith that that course should be laid wholly in the service of his ideal. For a time his choice was uncertain; his original intention of entering the church led to a momentary idea of founding a monastery with his money. But the gradually widening influence of the adventurousness of art that was working in him made him less and less willing to commit himself to any irrevocable step. He was beginning to realize his powers; his friends, who were no dishonest critics, confirmed his own feeling that his earliest poems were signs of a remarkable creative faculty. But he was not yet certain as

to the ways into which his art would lead him. Painting and architecture divided his allegiance with literature, and behind his consideration of all was the vague but unalterable determination to use his art in the service of mankind. His decision was wisely deferred until it should force itself upon him.

The first practical step taken by the Brotherhood—the friends retained the original name whilst renouncing all their monastic intentions—was the foundation of "The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine." Chaucer had been discovered, and the group's somewhat austere asceticism had been sweetened by the charity of the poet to whom Morris was henceforth never to fail in discipleship. A copy of the Pre-Raphaelite "Germ" had also established Rossetti in the friends' worship, and they had seen some of his paintings, together with those of Millais and Holman Hunt and Madox Brown. In all these things Morris found the conception of life that he had already made his own, in beautiful and more or less complete expression. Twelve numbers of the magazine appeared, financed by Morris. Its aim was the expression of the Brotherhood's artistic creed and its loyalty to the essential idea of the identity of art with life. Rossetti was among its contributors. Of Morris's own work in the venture, his earliest

poems and prose romances, something will be said in the next chapter.

Before leaving Oxford Morris and Burne-Jones together definitely abandoned their idea of entering the church. The latter decided on the work to which his life was to be devoted, whilst Morris formally adopted architecture as a profession. Arrangements were made for him to enter G. E. Street's Oxford office, and after a second visit to France and its churches and passing his Final schools, he took up his new work at the beginning of 1856. In his spare time he continued his writing and tried his hand at craftsmanship. Burne-Jones went up to London a few months later. Morris followed shortly when Street moved his headquarters. Together they formed a close acquaintance with Rossetti. That dominating personality was not slow to recognize the powers of his new friends, and insisted that Morris should turn painter, asserting, with an inconsequence worthy of one of Oscar Wilde's creations, that everybody should be a painter. His proposal, although it had no permanent effect on Morris, showed that the election of architecture was not unalterable. For a time Morris painted, throwing into the work the energy that was inseparable from all his undertakings, but he was quick to realize that with all his understanding of the painter's

art he could not achieve its mastery. The fact that he had been tempted to alter his choice even tentatively, however, was enough to make him suspicious of the choice itself. Without any conviction as to the possibility of a career as a painter, he abandoned his profession as architect at the end of a year. His state was one of considerable danger. Rich enough to make work unnecessary as a means of living, exposed to an influence so impetuous as Rossetti's, already showing considerable power in several forms of expression as an artist, wholly unable to dissociate one from the other, seeing but one purpose behind them all, there was a probability, in the light of experience almost a certainty, that he would become an excellent amateur of the arts, practising many things with credit and triumphant in none, a generous patron, a kind of titanic dilettante. The manner in which he overcame this danger is one of the most remarkable things in the history of art. Had some circumstance, external or internal, forced him to concentrate himself on one or another of the forms with which he was experimenting, the escape would have been normal and relatively free of difficulty. But there was no such circumstance. His activities daily became more diffused rather than more concentrated. Carving, modelling, illuminating, designing, painting, poetry

and prose-writing, all became part of his daily scheme. Painting, indeed, he left, save for incidental purposes, but the scope of his practice widened with every year. And instead of becoming, as would seem to have been inevitable, an accomplished amateur, he became a master in everything he touched. He revolutionized many manufacturing processes and invested craftsmanship with a vitality that it had not known for centuries; he rediscovered secrets of mediæval artistry that were supposed to be finally lost, and re-established the union between beauty and things of common use; he became printer, and the books from his press are scarcely excelled in the history of printing; he wrote prose romances which in themselves would have secured him an honourable place in literature, and yet all these achievements might be cancelled and he would still stand as one of the greatest poets of his age; or, indeed, of any age. It is all an astonishing testimony to the vitality of his artistic conscience. However uncertain might be the expression of his art in these early days, the fundamental significance of art was rooted in his being with an unassailable strength. In the light of his life-work these first more or less indefinite gropings appear no longer as the whims of a nature uncertain of itself. The impulse within him was not to be satisfied by any

partial expression. If it was to create a new world in poetry, it must also strive to bring that world in some measure into the affairs of daily life. It was not sufficient for Morris that the dishes and goblets on the king's table in his song should be beautiful or that he should commemorate Jason in halls hung 'with richest webs.' The furnishings of his own table must be comely too, and the 'richest webs' should not be a memory alone. No more perfect example of critical stupidity could well be found than the notion that Morris, as a creative artist, separated himself from the affairs of the life about him, as if in retreat. Every line of poetry that he wrote was the direct expression of the spirit in which he ordered his daily practice.

Morris's feeling for mediævalism must not be misunderstood. He was fully conscious of the fact that a few centuries are as but a moment in the development of man, and he did not turn to early art as to the expression of a humanity differing in any fundamental way from the humanity of his own day. Nor did he turn to that aspect of mediævalism which has given it the name of the Dark Ages, but to the life that produced Giotto and Angelico, Van Eyck and Dürer, and Holbein and Memling, the monks whose illuminated books he prized so dearly,

and Chaucer.[1] He was not indifferent to the masterpieces of the modern world. The range of Shakespeare's humanity, Shelley's spiritual ardour, the passionate identification of truth with beauty which was as a gospel to Keats, the earlier poems of Tennyson and Browning, he accepted as revelations. Wordsworth and Milton he professed to dislike, but he more probably disliked the people who liked them wrongly. Nothing is more provocative than the praise of fools. But it was in the work of those early artists, the men from whom the Pre-Raphaelites took their name, that he found the most perfect and satisfying expression of the spiritual life which was for him the only true salvation on earth. It has been said by Paul Lacroix that in the painting of Jan Van Eyck 'the Gothic school decked itself with a splendour which left but little for the future Venetian school to achieve beyond; with one flight of genius, stiff and methodical conceptions became imbued with suppleness and vital action.' The same is substantially true of Chaucer in poetry. Some

[1] The chronological irregularity in this passage is deliberate, and I am aware, of course, that certain of the names mentioned cannot strictly be credited to mediævalism. But a nice distinction of epochs is not necessary for the present purpose. There was, in Morris's view of art, a kinship between Giotto and Holbein which was unaffected by the fact that the former died in 1336, whilst Holbein saw the full day of the northern renaissance two hundred years later.

lessons in rudimentary technique might have been learned by these men from their predecessors, but their powers of expression were vibrant as some newly-discovered energy, and they used them in all their freshness to embody a sane, simple view of life such as Morris himself held. The subtlety which might follow in the evolution from these beginnings, the greater intricacy of achievement, would take their place in his consciousness, but nothing could ever displace his worship of these frank and exultant records of man's joy in his work, a joy that he hoped would yet be regained. They and their kind remained for him, throughout his life, the supreme examples of the meaning of art.

When he gave up his work in Street's office, Morris moved with Burne-Jones to rooms in Red Lion Square. They were unfurnished, and out of this circumstance really sprang the beginnings of 'Morris and Company,' although the firm was not actually founded until 1861. The two artists found nothing in the shops that was tolerable, so Morris made rough designs of furniture and commissioned a carpenter to execute them in plain deal. Chairs, a massive table, a settle and a wardrobe were among the first acquisitions. Rossetti painted two panels of the settle, and Burne-Jones decorated the wardrobe with paintings from Chaucer. When Morris

built his own house this process was carried out on a larger scale, but the beginnings of the revolution of house-furnishing in England are clearly traceable to the rooms in Red Lion Square.

In the Long Vacation of 1875 Rossetti conceived the ill-fated scheme of mural paintings for the new hall of the Oxford Union. The story need not be told here in any detail. Morris and Burne-Jones were pressed unto the service with some six or seven others, and each painted one picture, Morris in addition designing and carrying out the decoration of the ceiling. No proper preparations were made for the work, and the paintings have perished. The undertaking is interesting to us here as throwing sidelights on certain aspects of Morris's temperament. He had begun and finished his picture long before any of the others, and while they were still engaged on their appointed shares he had voluntarily set himself to the ceiling design. His capacity for work, of which this is the first striking example, was always enormous, and it is not surprising to hear that a distinguished doctor, speaking of his comparatively early death at the age of sixty-three, said, 'I consider the case is this: the disease is simply being William Morris and having done more work than most ten men.' It was on this occasion, too, that his strange store of assimilated knowledge was put to prac-

tical use. The paintings were all taken from the "Mort d'Arthur," and models were required for arms and armour. They were not to be found, and Morris, unaided by books of reference, designed them, and they were made by a jobbing smith under his supervision. When the Union work was finished he took rooms in Oxford instead of returning to London, and among the new friends that he made was Swinburne, then an undergraduate at Balliol. He continued his apprenticeship as a painter with enthusiasm but lessening conviction, but poetry was already becoming a first consideration with him. He had already published a few poems, as we have seen, in the "Oxford and Cambridge Magazine," and several others were written during his temporary residence in Oxford.

He was a man of fine physique and a remarkable vehemence of temper. Burne-Jones tells us that when they were painting the Union walls and needed models they sat for each other, and that Morris 'had a head always fit for Lancelot or Tristram.' To think a thing was generally to say it. His intolerance of everything vulgar and mean and disloyal in art and life found immediate and forceful expression. A friend who knew him well tells me of an occasion when he went with Burne-Jones to the theatre. They were sitting in the pit, and one of the actresses was

incurring Morris's particular displeasure by reason of her misuse of her mother-tongue. At a moment of tension she had to enter and announce that her father was dead. She did so, but to the effect that her 'father was *dad*.' Morris could bear it no longer, and standing up with his hands clenched he roared across the theatre, 'What the devil do you mean by dad?' to the utter discomfiture of his companion. Insincerity—and incompetence he took to be a form of insincerity—at all times exhausted his patience, and he was never careful to conceal his feelings.

The time of preparation was now passing into the time of achievement. Morris's nature had been spared much of the shock and stress to which it might have been subjected in its growth by the vulgarity and violent uncertainty of his age, by the fortunate contact with men who were in revolt. The movement that they represented and of which he was a part was large and strong enough to make a positive and progressive life of its own instead of being merely an isolated expression of turbulent disagreement. It was one of those rare manifestations, a revolt the first purpose of which was not to destroy but to create. To this influence had been added that of a countryside gravely beautiful, one full of the shadows and colour of romance, or, more pre-

cisely, of the northern romance to which he was always to lend his most faithful service. It must not be supposed that this implies any coldness in his nature, which was at all times finely passionate. But it was, always, also simple, and simplicity of passion is the ultimate distinction of the North. The luxuriance of the South, with all its beauty, tends to obscurity. Nothing is further from wisdom than to suppose that the passion of the North is cold; it is merely naked. His characteristic simplicity of outlook was not yet impressing itself with its final certainty on his work, but it was already in being, as is clear from the records of his personality as it appeared to his friends at the beginning of his career.

Such was the nature of the man, who, fostered to articulate expression in a spiritual atmosphere which it has been my purpose to describe, was about to make his first appeal as poet to the public. Early in 1858, Messrs. Bell and Daldy published *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems.*

II

EARLY POEMS AND PROSE

In insisting upon the simplicity of Morris's artistic ideal it is well to examine a little closely the precise meaning of simplicity. Spiritual adventure is the supremely momentous thing in a man's life, but it is also the most intangible. Art being the most perfect expression of spiritual adventure, its function is to impart to the recipient some measure of that exaltation experienced by its creator at the moment of conception. But to attain this end the art must have that instinctive rightness which cannot be achieved by taking thought but only by a rarity of perception which lends essential truth to the common phrase that the artist is born, not made. If you give a potter a lump of clay he may shape it into a vessel ugly or beautiful. If our artistic intelligence or our spiritual intelligence is awake, we shall instantly determine the result; if ugly it will revolt us, or at best leave us indifferent; if beautiful it will give us joy. But the difference, which is evident enough to our

consciousness, does not enable us to define the distinction between the ugly and the beautiful, the dead and the quick. We only know that in the one there is an obscure and wonderful vitality and satisfying completeness that is lacking in the other. The beautiful thing may be perfectly simple, but it nevertheless has in it something strange and indefinable, something as elusive as life itself. The simple must not be confused with the easy. When Morris read his first poem to the acclamation of his friends, and announced that if this was poetry it was very easy to write, it must be remembered that he meant that it was easy for the rare creative organisation that was William Morris. No doubt it was just as easy for Shelley in the moment of creation to set down an image of desolation as perfect as

Blue thistles bloomed in cities,

as it is for the veriest poetaster to produce his commonplaces, and the result is certainly as simple, but the one is touched into life by the god-like thing which we call imagination, whilst the other is nerveless. The bow that was as iron to the suitors bent as a willow wand to the hand of Ulysses. The simplicity of Morris's art is yet compact of the profound and inscrutable mystery. It is not wholly true to say that all great or good art is simple. From Donne to Browning

and Meredith there have been poets whose art is complex and yet memorable. It is not my present purpose to discuss the precise value of simplicity in art, but to point out that simplicity does not imply either superficiality or the worthless kind of ease.

Richard Watson Dixon said that in his opinion Morris never excelled his early poems in achievement, and his judgment in the matter has been echoed a good many times with far less excuse than Dixon himself could plead. To him they represented the first impassioned expression of a life which he had shared, and enthusiasms which he had helped to kindle, and by which in turn he had been fostered. He was the man to whom Morris first read his first poem, and there was naturally a fragrance in the memory which nothing could ever quite replace. But the echoes have no such justification, and are generally the result of incomplete knowledge. *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* is quite good enough to make it safe to avow a preference for it, without reading the later work. A reputation for taste may be preserved here, with the least possible labour. But there is nothing in the volume which helps to make the position really tenable. There is, indeed, scarcely any poet who can point to a first volume of such high excellence, so completely individual, so certain in intention,

as could Morris. But to set it above the freedom and poignancy of *The Life and Death of Jason*, the tenderness and architectural strength of *The Earthly Paradise* and the fiery triumph of *Sigurd the Volsung* is a critical absurdity. It is a remarkable book, one which in itself would have assured Morris of his place in the history of poetry, but it remains no more than the exquisite prelude of a man whose complete achievement in poetry was to stand with the noblest of the modern world.

The chief evidence of immaturity which is found in Morris's first book is a certain vagueness of outline in some of the poems. The wealth of decorative colour of which he was never to be dispossessed is already here, and on the whole it is used fitly and with restraint. Effects such as

> A great God's angel standing, *with such dyes*
> *Not known on earth, on his great wings*

and

> he sat alone
> *With raiment half blood-red, half white as snow.*

and

> Also her hands have lost that way
> Of clinging that they used to have;
> They look'd quite easy, *as they lay*
> *Upon the silken cushions brave*
> *With broidery of apples green.*

And again,

The blue owls on my father's hood
Were a little dimm'd as I turn'd away,

and whole passages in such poems as *The Wind*, and even poems in their entirety such as *The Gilliflower of Gold* depend as much upon their colour as if actually done with a brush; and they depend safely, whilst the use of one art by another can scarcely be more triumphantly vindicated than by the lines in *A Good Knight in Prison*, where Sir Guy says:—

For these vile beasts that hem me in
These Pagan beasts who live in sin
. . . . .
Why, all these things I hold them just
Like dragons in a missal-book,
Wherein, whenever we may look,
We see no horror, yea delight,
We have, the colours are so bright.

There are moments, however, in this volume when the poet's power of visualizing, as with the eyes of the painter, lead him into a weakness from which his later work is entirely free. When Guenevere says:—

This is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day
I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,

When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
Our hands being left behind strained far away.

we feel that a certain sacrifice of emotional

directness of speech is being made to a sense that intrudes on the poetry without intensifying it. And we have the same feeling when Galahad says:—

> No maid will talk
> Of sitting on my tomb until the leaves
> Grow big upon the bushes of the walk,
> East of the Palace-pleasaunce, *make it hard*
> *To see the minster therefrom.*

The elaboration in these places blurs rather than quickens our vision, as it does again in Rapunzel's song:—

> Send me a true knight,
> Lord Christ, with a steel sword, bright,
> Broad and trenchant; yea, *and seven*
> *Spans from hilt to point, O Lord!*
> *And let the handle of his sword*
> *Be gold on silver.*

We may almost forgive a young poet flaws which are in themselves lovely and are but excesses of a method which he commonly uses to wholly admirable ends; but they are flaws none the less. The sense of values is not yet consistently true. But the indistinctness of outline of which I have spoken is a more serious weakness than this occasional indiscretion in the use of colour.

The poems in the volume may, somewhat arbitrarily, but fitly for the present purpose, be considered as four or five groups. The poems

in the first, headed by *The Defence of Guenevere*, *King Arthur's Tomb* and *Sir Galahad*, have love for their central theme and aim at conducting a more or less simple love story to its successful or disastrous issue with directness and clarity. The obscurity that alone threatens their complete success is not due to subtlety on the one hand nor to vagueness of conception on the other, but merely to a power of expression that was not yet sure of itself. Psychological subtlety was not, as is sometimes supposed, outside Morris's range; on the contrary, he gives constant and varied evidence of a depth of perception in human affairs quite remarkable, as will be shown. But the subtlety was never confused and blurred by the sophistry that tempts so many poets on making a really pregnant psychological discovery into all kinds of unintelligible elaboration. When he saw clearly into the workings of the mind he recorded his vision in a few sharp and clearly defined strokes, and left it. Subtlety and obscurity are never synonymous in his work. And although, at twenty-four, his understanding of man's love for woman was naturally not very profound or wide in its range, it was passionate and quite sure of itself within its own imaginative experience. His failure in places to give his understanding clear utterance is the failure of

a man not yet wholly used to his medium. When Guenevere says:—

> While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would crowd,
>
> Belonging to the time ere I was bought
> By Arthur's great name and his little love;
> Must I give up for ever then, I thought,
>
> That which I deemed would ever round me move
> Glorifying all things; for a little word,
> Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove
>
> Stone-cold for ever?

the thought is neither close nor difficult, nor, on the other hand, is it loose, but the statement is not lucid. It is, however, intelligible after we have sifted it a little carefully, but in such a passage as—

> A little thing just then had made me mad;
> I dared not think, as I was wont to do,
> Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had
>
> Held out my long hand up against the blue,
> And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,
> Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,
>
> There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,
> Round by the edges; what should I have done,
> If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,
>
> And startling green drawn upward by the sun?

the thought is hidden in an utterance so tangled and involved as to make it almost impossible to straighten it out, and in any case poetry so enigmatic ceases to be poetry at all. Such ex-

treme instances are, however, very rare even in this first volume, and scarcely ever to be found in his later work. The title-poem throughout is uncertain in its expression. There are passages of fine directness and precision as—

> And fast leapt Caitiff's sword, until my knight
> Sudden threw up his sword to his left hand,
> Caught it, and swung it; that was all the fight,

and the picture of Guenevere at the close, listening for Launcelot, 'turn'd sideways,'

> Like a man who hears
>
> His brother's trumpet sounding through the wood
> Of his foe's lances.

but in spite of these and the unquestionable beauty of the poem's cumulative effect, there is a troubling lack of firmness in many places that makes the achievement incomplete. I think that the use of *terza rima* in itself has something to do with this. In a poem like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" we are prepared to follow the poet in any imaginative flight that he may attempt from moment to moment, and his adventurousness finds all the time some turn of thought that will perfectly fit the exacting demands of the form that he is using. But in Morris's poem the process of the narrative to be convincing can only be conducted in one way, and that way the poet frequently finds obstructed

by the necessity of a verse-form particularly difficult in English. However this may be, *King Arthur's Tomb* is certainly less open to this charge of obscurity in utterance, and the thought has more imaginative force in it. There are passages here that suggest the presence of a poet to whom the highest things in poetry may yet be possible. Guenevere's cry—

> Unless you pardon, what shall I do, Lord,
> But go to hell? and there see day by day
> Foul deed on deed, hear foulest word on word,
> For ever and for ever, such as on the way
>
> To Camelot I heard once from a churl,
> That curled me up upon my jennet's neck
> With bitter shame; how then, Lord, should I curl
> For ages and for ages? *dost thou reck*
>
> *That I am beautiful, Lord, even as you*
> And your dear mother? why did I forget
> You were so beautiful, and good, and true,
> That you loved me so, Guenevere? O yet
>
> If even I go to hell, *I cannot choose*
> *But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep*
> *From loving Launcelot.*

has a poignancy and a curious understanding of the action of a mind in spiritual anguish that were to be so nobly employed in things like the close of *Jason*. The dramatic opposition of Guenevere's love, which is all the while troubled by the half-consciousness of sin, to Launcelot's, which is its own sole cause and justification, is,

further, a first indication of the poet's power to set the elemental passions in action at once simple and convincing. When the Queen finds her lover lying on the dead king's tomb, she schools her tongue to a cold absurdity, not daring to trust herself,—'Well done! to pray for Arthur,' and Launcelot cries out:—

> Guenevere! Guenevere!
> Do you not know me, are you gone mad? fling
> Your arms and hair about me, lest I fear
> You are not Guenevere, but some other thing.

and the queen's answer falls with the tragic intensity of spiritual self-betrayal—

> Pray you forgive me, fair lord Launcelot!
> I am not mad, but I am sick; they cling,
> God's curses, unto such as I am; not
>
> Ever again shall we twine arms and lips.

There is in this, and in the whole of the poem from this point a true and incisive sense of conflict, continually heightened by such perfectly balanced turns of the imagination as when Launcelot says:—

> lo you her thin hand,
> That on the carven stone can not keep still
> Because she loves me against God's command.

culminating in the confused feelings of terror and appeased destiny at the end of Guenevere's speaking.

Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery is, it may

be said, entirely free of the obscurity, and shows, if not a profounder, yet a more acute power of perception. The beauty and tenderness of love-sorrow are themes common enough in poetry, but Morris by making Galahad's experience of them spring from his thought of other men's love presents them with a peculiarly fresh poignancy. Galahad on his quest, 'dismal, unfriended,' thinks of the other knights.

> And what if Palomydes also ride,
> And over many a mountain and bare heath
> Follow the questing beast with none beside?
> Is he not able still to hold his breath
>
> With thoughts of Iseult? doth he not grow pale
> With weary striving, to seem best of all
> To her, 'as she is best,' he saith? to fail
> Is nothing to him, he can never fall.
>
> For unto such a man love-sorrow is
> So dear a thing unto his constant heart,
> That even if he never win one kiss,
> Or touch from Iseult, it will never part.

And Launcelot can think of Guenevere, 'next month I kiss you, or next week, And still you think of me,' but Galahad himself

> Some carle shall find
> Dead in my arms in the half-melted snow,

and people will but say that he 'If he had lived, had been a right good knight' and that very evening will be glad when 'in their scarlet

sleeves the gay-dress'd minstrels sing.' The force of the poet's thought about a particular phase of love is intensified in an unmistakable way by placing the utterance on the lips of a man who is not speaking of his own experience, which would have been beautiful but a little sentimental, but of his hunger for the experience, sorrowful though it may be, which is emotionally tragic. And we find another stroke of memorable subtlety when the voice of the vision says to the knight, speaking of Launcelot's love for Guenevere :—

> He is just what you know, O Galahad,
> This love is happy even as you say,
> But would you for a little time be glad,
> To make ME sorry long day after day?
>
> Her warm arms round his neck half throttle me
> The hot love-tears burn deep like spots of lead.

The thought here, with wonderful instinct on the part of the poet, is precisely Galahad's own. It shapes the compensation to his spirit for its hunger and loneliness. We feel, in passages such as these, that here is a poet exultant in the exercise of a rare faculty of statement. The spiritual discovery and the announcement are in perfect correspondence. *A Good Knight in Prison, Old Love, The Sailing of the Sword* and *Welland River* are the other poems that may be included in this first group. They attempt a

smaller psychological range than the poems already considered, but they have the same emotional intention and achieve it with clarity and precision. These poems already show the pervasive passion for the earth that has been discussed; the landscape is everywhere informed by intimacy and tenderness. Another aspect of the poet's temper too finds expression—an extraordinarily vivid sense of natural change and death. With speculation as to the unknown Morris was never concerned in his poetry. Death was to him neither a fearful thing nor yet a deliverance or a promise. It was simply the severing of a beautiful thing that he loved—life; the end of a journey that no labours could make wearisome. He did not question it, nor did he seek to evade its reality, but the thought of it was always coloured with a profound if perfectly brave melancholy. Without ever disputing with his reason the possibility of death's beneficence, it was not the beneficence of death that he perceived emotionally, but the pity of it. It was a fading away, and as such it filled him with a regretful tenderness, just as did the fading of the full year. The close of *The Ode to the West Wind* crystallizes a mental attitude of which Morris was temperamentally incapable. But it is, of course, a mistake to suppose that the beauty of his poetry suffers in consequence. It

is not the nature of the mood that matters, but its personal intensity.

The poems of the second group, of which *The Chapel in Lyoness* is the most notable example, have a central point in common with those of the first, but there is a mysticism in them which is quite unrelated to the obscurity which has been examined. It is not a mysticism that has any definite scheme or purpose underlying it; indeed I am not sure that mysteriousness would not be a fitter word to use. It is just the mysteriousness of artistic youth, proud of the faculty of which it finds itself possessed and a little prodigal in its use. There is still the effort to keep the lines of the story clear, but they are deliberately the lines of a soft brush rather than a steel point. To read *The Chapel in Lyoness*, *Concerning Geffray Teste Noire* and *The Judgment of God* is to receive an impression which is clear enough as long as we refrain from seeking to define it too precisely. The central thought and incidents of these poems are set out perfectly plainly, but there is superimposed a mysticism to which, happily, there is no key. We may never be quite sure of its meaning, but we know at least that it does not mean something which would be clear if once we divined some elusive secret of its nature. It is like the soft scent of an orchard,

and we accept it as gratefully and with as little question.

In poems such as *Rapunzel* and *The Wind*, however, the quality that in those other poems was but an incident is adopted as a definite manner. What was before merely atmosphere is here employed as the substance. These two poems scarcely make any direct statement at all, and yet they succeed in an extraordinary way in conveying a precise intellectual impression. Through a wealth of imagery and verbal colour run thin threads of suggestion that, fragile as they are, yet stand out as clearly as the veins in dark marble and have the same values. It is remarkable that the coloured clouds in which these poems are, as it were, wrapped, are never stifling. The flowers of Morris's poetry are never of the hot-house. At the moments when he is most freely putting language to decorative use, he preserves a freshness as of windy moorlands or the green stalks of lilies. At times the threads of suggestion disappear altogether, and in the third group we find poems which are frankly essays in colour without any attempt at concrete significance. *The Tune of Seven Towers*, *Two Red Roses Across the Moon*, *The Blue Closet*, are examples. It is wrong to say that these poems have no meaning. They mean exactly the colours that they themselves

create. It would be as wise to say that a sunset or a blue distance of mountains is meaningless. Somewhere between poems like *The Wind* and *The Tune of Seven Towers* may be placed *The Gilliflower of Gold, Spell Bound, Golden Wings*, and two or three others.

The volume, if it were to be measured by the poems already mentioned, would have the first great quality of being unforgettable. A note is struck which is not necessarily beyond the compass but certainly outside the temperament of anyone but Morris. There is at present no trace of the discipleship to Chaucer, but a suggestion here and there of kinship with the Coleridge of "Kubla Khan" and the Keats of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The method of the later poems is already clearly suggested, but the feeling and expression are marked by the natural limitations and splendid excesses of youth. Morris places his figures on a background which is not unrelated to life but unrelated to the inessential circumstances of life. Through a changing year of daffodil tufts and roses, cornfields and autumn woods and the frozen twigs of winter, passes a pageant of knights in armour of silver and blue steel, with bright devices on their tabards and shields strewn with stars or flashing back gold to the sunlight, and queens and ladies passionate and beautiful. But they

move on an earth that is the real earth of Morris's own experience; he has a definite meaning when he says

> Why were you more fair
> Than aspens in the autumn at their best?

and the enchantment of his forests is that of the hornbeam twilight of his Essex homeland. And they themselves are people of flesh and blood, stirred by the common emotions of humanity. The passion, the glamour, and the poignancy of love and life all find mature expression in these pages, but we have to wait until *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* for the presence of the innate nobility of love and life behind these things. There is at present none of the fine austerity that is a quality essential to the highest poetry, but that is but to say that Morris in his youth was writing as a young man should and must write. The growth of the prophet in the poet is not to be looked for in the first fervour of song. The most that we can ask justly at this season is witness to the presence of the poet, and this we have here in abundance.

The most memorable achievement of the volume is, however, *Sir Peter Harpdon's End*, which stands by itself, or, perhaps, with one other poem, *The Haystack in the Floods*. The historian of English drama during the second half of the nineteenth century might, if he were

unwary, omit William Morris from his reckonings. If he were astute enough to remember him it would probably be as the author of *Love is Enough*. And yet at a time when some curious spell seems to have fallen on the poets whenever they turned their thoughts to the stage, *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* reminds us of one, at least, to whom the union of drama and poetry was not impossible. Morris himself would seem to have been unconscious of the fact, for not only was he careless in this instance when a little care would have made his success strikingly complete, but henceforth he neglected this side of his faculty, exercising it on but one other occasion, and then in a more or less experimental mood, of which something will be said later. It will be well to examine this short play in detail, for its importance is apt to be under-estimated. In writing it Morris realized, as did no poet of his time and scarcely any poet since the close of the great epoch of poetic drama in England, the exact value of action in drama. The complete subordination of character and idea to action is a brief epitome of that degeneration of the modern theatre from which we are now witnessing the dawn of a deliverance. The supreme, though not necessarily the only, function of the drama is to show the development of character and the progress

of idea through the medium of action, and until to-day the stage has been surrendered for a century, if not for a longer period, to work that is wholly unconcerned with this condition. The event has been everything. The poets from Shelley to Swinburne have realized this error and revolted, but in their eagerness to correct an abuse that was threatening the highest manifestation of their art, they have with amazing regularity overlooked another condition which, if not of equal importance, cannot be disregarded without lamentable results. Determined to dispossess action of its usurped authority, they have neglected its lawful and indispensable service. Their opponents in asserting action at the cost of all other things, and having, in consequence, nothing to say beyond the bare statement of events, have failed to produce either good literature or good drama, whilst they themselves, in turning to ideas alone, have had much to say and have so produced good and often noble literature, but in neglecting to preserve the right balance between ideas and action they too have failed to produce good drama. They have, unfortunately, no just answer to the charge that they constantly allow the play of character and idea to be unrelated to the action which they have chosen as their framework. Their failure in dramatic result, though free of the deplorable poverty and

baseness of the method against which they were a reaction, is no less complete. Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, all wrote fine dramatic poetry, but they cannot show between them a poetic play that achieves with any precision the fundamental purpose of drama.

Morris's instinct in this matter was perfectly poised. The mechanical part of the technique in *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* is as crude as it well could be, chiefly, as I have suggested, on account of the poet's indifference. Short scenes follow each other in rapid succession, and in the middle of the play there is a hiatus which is intelligible enough but destroys the dramatic continuity. These defects make it difficult, though not impossible, for stage presentation, but otherwise it would, I believe, survive the ordeal triumphantly. The opening of the play is admirably contrived. In a few deft strokes the character of Peter Harpdon is outlined, and we know that he has humour and understanding of men, and a tenderness coloured by a certain roughness of temper. All this is shown strictly by his relation to the action in which he is involved—there is not a line but helps the development of this. Then in perfectly natural sequence the action enables him in a speech of little more than twenty lines to define the circumstances from which it has sprung, and

thus we have set before us at the outset the nature of the protagonist and the situation in relation to which we are to look for that nature's manifestation; and already it is clear, in the character of John Curzon, that the people among whom Harpdon is to move will be no less sharply stated and proved than himself. The construction of this opening could not well be more skilful or instinctively right. Then follows what at first seems to be a momentary lapse into the dramatic error of which I have spoken. In a long soliloquy Peter reveals directly his spiritual and mental attitude towards this action in which he is involved and indirectly the commentary of the poet himself upon that attitude. This in itself is perfectly legitimate, and supported, of course, by all the poets of whom Shakespeare is the spring, indeed by all the great dramatic poets of literature. The Greek chorus realizes this end as one of its essential functions no less clearly than do the soliloquies of Hamlet; and until the poets see once again the significance of this fact and adapt it to modern needs, refusing to have their authority usurped by theatrical showmen and their stage carpenters, they will continue to fail in bringing back their art to the theatre. But it must always be remembered that this choric element of the drama justifies itself only as

long as it limits itself to the presentation of idea growing directly out of the action. When it allows digression and elaboration for their own sake, or the sake of some altogether extraneous idea, in short for any reason other than intensifying the fundamental idea which the progress of the action creates, it becomes undramatic and ceases to fulfil its only right purpose. It is at this point that the poets since the close of the Elizabethan age have misunderstood the necessities of drama, and in Peter Harpdon's soliloquy we suspect Morris for a moment of the same error. But careful examination of the speech itself proves the suspicion to be almost if not wholly unfounded. We find that there is nothing that is not the immediate result of his position, and the worst that can be said of it is that there are turns of thought which, although not dramatically irrelevant, are a little superfluous and do not heighten our perception. It is curious that in this speech there is evidence of external contemporary influence in manner such as is scarcely to be found elsewhere in the book. There is at least a suggestion of Browning in such lines as—

> Now this is hard: a month ago,
> And a few minutes' talk had set things right
> 'Twixt me and Alice;—if she had a doubt,
> As (may Heaven bless her!) I scarce think she had,
> 'Twas but their hammer, hammer in her ears,
> Of 'how Sir Peter fail'd at Lusac bridge:'

And 'how Sir Lambert' (think now!) 'his dear friend,
His sweet, dear cousin, could not but confess
That Peter's talk tended towards the French,
Which he' (for instance Lambert) 'was glad of,
Being' (Lambert, you see) 'on the French side.'

The first scene closes with a swift turn of action carried on correspondingly swift dramatic speech. Peter Harpdon is defending an English castle in Poictou. His antagonist is his cousin Lambert, who has misrepresented a circumstance of war to impugn Peter's loyalty to his cause, careful for his own purposes that the rumour shall reach the ears of Peter's lady, Alice. Peter has had no means of defending himself, and his soliloquy is the outcome of the suffering that he experiences at the thought of his wife's possible mistrust of him. As he finishes, his servant, Clisson, comes in again, saying that a herald has come from Lambert—

What says the herald of our cousin, sir?

CURZON. So please you, sir, concerning your estate,
He has good will to talk with you.

SIR PETER. Outside,
I'll talk with him, close by the gate St. Ives.
Is he unarm'd?

CURZON. Yea, sir, in a long gown.

SIR PETER. Then bid them bring me hither my furr'd gown,
With the long sleeves, and under it I'll wear,
By Lambert's leave, a secret coat of mail.

He will also take an axe, one—as we should expect of Morris—'with Paul wrought on the blade'—

> CURZON. How, sir! Will you attack him unawares,
> And slay him unarm'd?
>
> SIR PETER. Trust me, John, I know
> The reason why he comes here with sleeved gown
> Fit to hide axes up. So, let us go.

Peter Harpdon is a Gascon knight, and in the next scene Lambert urges that this fact combined with expedience, for the French are in the ascendancy, should induce him to leave the English. Peter answers him at length but finishes in an aside—

> Talk, and talk, and talk—
> I know this man has come to murder me,
> And yet I talk still.

Lambert accuses him then directly—

> If I said
> 'You are a traitor, being, as you are
> Born Frenchman.'

They flash out at each other and Lambert 'takes hold of something in his sleeve,' strikes at Peter with a dagger, and is taken. He is brought before Harpdon in the castle and sentenced—

> Let the hangman shave his head quite clean,
> And cut his ears off close up to the head.

Again we have the clear-cut delineation of character thrown up on a framework of simple and logical action which all the while is interesting as a means but not as an end. The blend of nobility and savagery in Peter's nature stands sharply contrasted with the meanness and merely dull cruelty of Lambert's. At this point the hiatus occurs. The next scene is in the French camp, and Sir Peter Harpdon is a prisoner before Guesclin and his officers, Lambert being one of them. The dramatic opposition of the situation to that which has immediately preceded it is admirable, but we need some explanation that is not made. Apart from this defect, however, Morris continues to build up his play with flawless instinct. Defeat had turned Lambert's cruelty into pitiful and cringing terror, whilst Peter at the moment of his power over his rival, although he had not spared him, had shown some mercy, as to one whom he despised. Now, with the shifting circumstance, the two prove themselves with unerring completeness. Defeat purges Peter Harpdon's nature of all its grosser parts, and he responds perfectly to the demands of tragic chance; whilst Lambert in his triumph reveals himself in all the degradation of a mean and wholly unheroic villainy. In both cases the development is logical, indeed inevitable, and yet it depends

strictly upon the course of the action for its being. Already we know the natures of the men, and, given the event, can foresee their attitude with some certainty, but it needs the event itself to complete our understanding. Peter is not a coward nor lacking in nobility, yet when he hears that Lambert has come to him 'in a long gown' he knows what that means, and he makes no foolish boast of fearlessness, but frankly prepares himself with mail and axe. Now, before his judges, the same temper is evident. Quite simply, and with no blind defiance or pretence at indifference, he pleads for his life, not, as the squire says of him afterwards—

> Sullenly brave as many a thief will die,
> Nor yet as one that plays at japes with God.

He states his case clearly, with dignity, yet earnestly. Clisson intercedes for him in a passage that outlines with precision yet another character, and Guesclin is sorry but obdurate; he must die. Then Lambert taunts him. He exults in the downfall of his enemy with a cruelty that is bestial yet calculated in every stroke, until his victim blenches. Then—

> I think you'll faint,
> Your lips are grey so; yes, you will, unless
> You let it out and weep like a hurt child;
> Hurrah! you do now. Do not go just yet,
> For I am Alice, am right like her now;
> Will you not kiss me on the lips, my love?

and Clisson breaks in—

> You filthy beast, stand back and let him go,
> Or by God's eyes I'll choke you.

This second speech of Clisson's is his last, and yet the tenderness and strength of the man are shown so definitely as to make him complete and living. He continues, asking Peter to forgive him for his share in his death—

> I would,
> If it were possible, give up my life
> Upon this grass for yours; fair knight, although,
> He knowing all things knows this thing too, well,
> Yet when you see His face some short time hence,
> Tell Him I tried to serve you.

and Peter makes his last utterance, full of passionate realization of the moment, yet chiming to his character consistently to the end—

> Oh! my lord,
> I cannot say this is as good as life,
> But yet it makes me feel far happier now,
> And if at all, after a thousand years,
> I see God's face, I will speak loud and bold,
> And tell Him you were kind, and like Himself;
> Sir, may God bless you!

He would not have them think that when he wept he did so because of Lambert's taunts. He was

> Deep in thought
> Of all things that have happened since I was
> A little child; and so at last I thought
> Of my true lady: truly, sir, it seem'd

No longer gone than yesterday, that this
Was the sole reason God let me be born
Twenty-five years ago, that I might love
Her, my sweet lady, and be loved by her;

and so up to the close, which has all the awe and terror but also the pity and exaltation of authentic tragedy—

I only wept because
There was no beautiful lady to kiss me
Before I died. . . .
. . . O for some lady, though
I saw her ne'er before; Alice, my love,
I do not ask for; Clisson was right kind,
If he had been a woman, I should die
Without this sickness.

The last scene, as just in dramatic instinct as the rest of the play, tells of the bearing of the news of Peter's death to the Lady Alice.

I have examined this play in some detail, and with a good many quotations, for two reasons. One, already stated, to show that Morris had an understanding of the nature of drama which is generally overlooked, and secondly, because it is a common thing to hear people to whom poetry is a matter of real importance say that they find Morris—for all his beauty—languid and lacking in power of concentration. If *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* be languid or anything but tense with concentrated emotion from beginning to end, then I confess my sense of values to be

much awry. And, although he left the dramatic form, he did not lose this quality in his later work. He employed, for reasons which will be discussed later, a certain easy and decorative elaboration in much of his writing, but at the right moment in *Jason*, in the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* and in *Sigurd the Volsung*, he was master of the direct vitality and vibrating force that he first used in *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* and elsewhere when he needed them in this earliest volume, as in *The Haystack in the Floods*, with unquestionable control and vividness.

The few poems that have not been mentioned are the lyrical expressions of moods, snatches of song and swift little pictures in many colours that give their own peculiar pleasure as do all the fragmentary strokes of a great artist. They are exquisitely done, but they must be read, not described.

Several of the poems published in *The Defence of Guenevere* volume had already appeared, as has been said, in "The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine." In the same magazine Morris had also printed his first essays in prose romance. A comparison of these with the poems shows very clearly the value of that exaltation apart from the discovery, which finds, as I have suggested, its expression in the music

or rhythmical pattern of verse. In more than one of these prose stories Morris uses a subject that differs in no fundamental quality from those used in many of the poems. The treatment shows the same tenderness, the same love of the earth, the same power of direct and vivid presentation of passion when it is needed, as in passages of *Gertha's Lovers*, and the same delight in colour and all beautiful things. And Morris uses his medium skilfully, and with a curiously personal touch ; his prose has the same freshness and light as his verse. In short, we have here two groups of work from the same man, alike in temper, substance and treatment, and in control, the only difference being that of form. And that difference is everything, for in the form lies the visible evidence of the spiritual pressure at the moment of conception. There is no more stupid error than to censure one work of art because it lacks the qualities of another with which it has no point of contact. No sane person thinks less of, say, " Wuthering Heights," because it has not the poetic perfection of " Adonais." But the case of Morris's early prose romances is different. They are delightful to read, they are in themselves the treasurable expression of a fine spirit, yet they have in them nothing that is not to be found in the poems. That being so, it is inevitable that

a close acquaintance with the poems should make us a little careless of these prose tales, for in the poems we have all the excellences that we find in the others, and we have added the rhythmic exaltation which is the light on the wings of poetry. Morris's fund of inventiveness was inexhaustible, but in his early prose it discovered no quality that peculiarly fitted itself to the medium; the inventiveness in the prose tales and the poems is the same, and there is, in consequence, no compensation in the one for the absence of the higher faculty of utterance that is found in the other. Morris realized this himself, and for the next thirty years created in verse. Nothing is further from my mind than to suggest that *The Story of the Unknown Church* and *Lindenborg Pool*, *Gertha's Lovers* and *The Hollow Land* and *Svend and his Brethren*, are other than beautiful expressions of a rare creative intelligence, but no clearer evidence of the essential difference between that which is poetry and that which is not could well be found than by setting side by side things so closely related in many ways, indeed in every way save one, as these stories and *The Defence of Guenevere* and *King Arthur's Tomb*, *Rapunzel* and *The Wind*, *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* and *Shameful Death*. Nor could anything be advanced more unanswerably supporting the

contention that verse is the one unassailable medium for poetry.

Nine years were to pass before Morris published his next book, *The Life and Death of Jason.* The course of his life and the nature of his development in the meantime are discussed briefly in the following chapter.

III

INTERLUDE

In 1859 Morris married Miss Jane Burden, of Oxford. To a man of his profound tenderness for all the simple and rational things of life, home was a symbol of the deepest significance. Homestead and homeland are words used constantly and lovingly in his writing. A man's home was, as he understood it, not merely a refuge from the serious business of life or a comfortable and convenient means of satisfying social requirements, but the temple of his daily worship. It should be at once a centre of his labours and an expression of himself. The application of the artist's understanding to daily conduct is not always possible, or of first importance, for it is the artist's function to persuade, not to compel; but such application is the logical outcome of true development that is not hindered by circumstance. We do not impugn Browning's sincerity either as a man or an artist because he mercilessly exposed the evils of Society and yet was a great diner-

out. We feel, indeed, that he was of sounder judgment and a finer charity than Shelley, who not only exposed the evils, but also left society gasping whilst he went naked to his dinner or made his house the asylum for anybody incapable of managing his own affairs. But it is, on the other hand, an everlasting vindication of Byron's strange personality that the man who wrote 'The Isles of Greece' gave his life in the service of the cause that he sang. Morris's unchanging gospel was that man should have joy in his work, which meant that the results of his work would in themselves be beautiful. To accept anything that was unlovely on any terms short of compulsion would, in consequence, have been to proclaim the truth without insisting upon it by example. Had he done so his art might have lost none of its vitality, but by steadily refusing to do so he made the common charge of aloofness even less intelligible than it would otherwise have been. Being a customer in the world's market he was determined not to degrade the men by whom the market was supplied. If he could find no other solution, he would supply it himself.

He bought a piece of land at Upton in Kent, careful that it should include an orchard. Here, with Philip Webb as architect, he built the Red

House, which was to be his home for five years —until circumstances made it necessary for him to live again in London. Immediately, the difficulty that had confronted him in his Red Lion Square rooms grew into one that was not to be met by the friendly co-operation of a jobbing carpenter. There was a large house to be furnished and fitted, and beautiful things had to be found for the purpose. He came away from the market empty-handed, but carrying in his mind the idea of Morris and Company. He would not only supply his own needs decently; he would remove a reproach.

The original prospectus of the firm announced the names of Rossetti, Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, Morris himself, and three others as partners. The history of the enterprise has been told by Mr. Mackail and others, and need not be discussed here in any detail. Its influence upon the lesser arts in England has been enormous, and its activities are, fortunately, still growing. When Morris died he had for some years been sole director of the venture, and its work embraced carpets, chintzes, wall-papers, stained glass, tapestries, tiles, furniture, wall-decoration—in short, everything by which a building might gain or lose in beauty. The first premises were in Red Lion Square, near to the poet's old rooms, and the earliest achieve-

ment of the firm was to help in making the Red House at Upton, in the words of Burne-Jones, "the beautifullest place on earth." Webb having designed the house—with Morris at his elbow—the firm furnished it and the painters of the group proceeded to decorate the inside surfaces. The house was made to fit the orchard, so that, as Mr. Mackail tells us in a beautiful sentence, "the apples fell in at the windows as they stood open on hot autumn nights." Gardening was one of the things of which Morris seems to have been born with knowledge, and he knew the uses of hollyhocks and sunflowers. Here, then, was a home, fashioned, as far as might be, into an earthly paradise. The story of these five years is a very charming one; open house was kept, and a good cellar and a bowling-green and tobacco jars were not wanting. Here the poet's two daughters were born, and we get a delightful picture of the house at a christening, with Rossetti refusing to wait until dessert for the raisins, and beds strewn about the drawing-room, Swinburne contenting himself with a sofa. These things, however, are to the biographer, and are set down with fitting grace in the book to which I have referred more than once.

Morris went up to London daily to conduct

the business at Red Lion Square. The value of the work that he had undertaken is even yet imperfectly realized. Most people whose artistic intelligence is awake contrive to have in their houses many beautiful things, but it is only when we have been into a house where everything is beautiful that we can understand the precise aim that caused Morris to become a manufacturer. There is an enchantment about such a dwelling-place that cannot be described, an atmosphere of health and completeness that must be experienced to be understood. A beautiful house was no more a luxury to Morris than sound meat on his table. But we have laws for our butchers, whilst we have none for our upholsterers. Some one once referred to Morris as the "upholsterer-poet," which pleased him greatly. That such a term should be meant as a reproach he could not understand. He asked for nothing better than to convince people that an upholsterer had a soul, and to make them determined not to deal with him until he showed it in his chairs and sofas.

The five years at Upton were a time of many energies and a steady establishment of the poet's attitude towards life. The London business was a serious and permanent undertaking, and demanded, by the nature of its being, Morris's constant personal attention. This, together with

the daily journeys and the claims and responsibilities—of no ordinary kind, as we have seen—of his new home, left little time on his hands, and his work as poet was of necessity put aside for the moment. But this fresh undertaking was of peculiar value to his development, and came at precisely the right moment. In his first volume of poems there had been the shadow of that new world that had already shaped itself in his consciousness. It had been beautiful, full of significance and promise, but still a shadow. It is not fanciful to suppose that had his mind not found some practical means of proving itself, of, so to speak, checking its progress step by step, his poetry would have retained this intangible quality to the end. This is not to suggest that the poetry of the *Guenevere* volume is in any sense unreal, but to remember its atmosphere of uncertainty, or to say, precisely, that it is but the shadow of the world that was in the poet's mind. In the workshop of Morris and Company, it seems to me, this proving ground was happily discovered. No better illustration, by contrast, of my meaning could be found than in that remarkable book, Mr. Gordon Craig's "Art of the Theatre." We have here, in some ways, the profoundest piece of writing on the theatre that has appeared in England. Many elementary truths that have been forgotten for centuries, if

indeed they have even been realized since the days which are commonly supposed to belong to an era before dramatic history had begun, are here made to stand out with startling clearness. But the radical defect of the book is a vagueness, an uncertainty of statement, an indiscipline of theory. We are constantly regretting the fact that Mr. Craig, as these beautiful and strangely suggestive thoughts went through his mind, had no stage and equipment ready to his hand to test them and bring them to perfect articulation —that he had no proving ground. Morris was more fortunate. He carried in his imagination a world of which I attempt to set down the conditions elsewhere. At first he could grasp only its beauty and wonderful hope; its perfect realization eluded him. It was remote not from reality but from his understanding. But now, working in Red Lion Square, delighting in the labour of his hands and inspiring the same delight in others: building a home that should bring daily joy to himself and his friends: investing the offices of husband and father and host with their normal and simple dignity and stripping them of every vestige of insincerity, he brought his dream to the crucible of experience. The result is that when next he attempts to shape his world into poetry there is nothing left of the indefinite. All the beauty and colour are

retained, all the tenderness and poignancy, but the poet has come up to his vision and the outlines are no longer in doubt. The shadows of *Guenevere* have become the vibrant men and women of *Jason*. The paradise has been brought to earth.

The only poetry that Morris wrote during these five years was part of a cycle of poems on the Troy war. The plan included twelve poems, six of which were written, two begun, and four untouched. Those that were written were never published, but Mr. Mackail describes them for us in some detail, and it is clear that Morris followed a just instinct in laying them aside. They are dramatic in form, and if finished they would doubtless have made interesting reading after *Sir Peter Harpdon's End*. But the eager unrest of the early volume is here moving towards turbulence. It is as much a mistake to suppose that turbulence is a quality peculiar to weakness as that it is necessarily a token of strength. Webster as a poet was turbulent and strong: Bulwer Lytton turbulent and weak. On the other hand, the noblest strength may be quiet, but so may the most insipid weakness. The opening of "Paradise Lost" is at once one of the quietest and one of the most powerful passages in poetry; but the quiet ease of the good Mr. Akenside is mere tediousness. The

point is that this new temper that showed itself in the Troy poems was not in itself one incapable of fine issues, but that it was at variance with the essential inclination of the poet's development, and that Morris himself felt this to be so. A curious myth has grown up about Morris's methods of work, to the effect that he threw this or that undertaking aside as it were by whim, forgetting all about it unless another whim sent him to it again. Were it not for this myth it would be unnecessary to say that great artists never work in this fashion. If we can but discover it, there is a perfectly hard and logical reason in all they do. When he was writing the Troy poems Morris had thirty years of vigour in front of him. He broke off the work in the middle, and never returned to it. We cannot suppose that he did this other than deliberately and with carefully considered reason. That reason was, it is clear, the conviction that he was labouring in a direction along which his genius did not lead him.

In 1865 Morris moved with his family to Bloomsbury. To leave Red House was a great trouble to his mind, but the daily journeys became increasingly irksome, and some fluctuation in his private money matters made it more than ever imperative that nothing should be left undone to make the business prosper. An able

business manager was found, and Morris was able to devote more of his time to actual designing and craftsmanship. The hours saved each day in travelling meant fresh opportunities for his highest creative work, and the scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* began to take definite shape.

IV

NARRATIVE POEMS

The Life and Death of Jason was originally planned as one of the stories for *The Earthly Paradise*, which appeared in 1868–70. It developed to a length too great, however, for this purpose, and was published separately in 1867. It won for Morris an immediate popularity, and it marks his realization of a matured and fully rounded manner in poetry. The *Guenevere* volume had announced with certainty the presence of a new poet, but it had said nothing at all conclusively as to the nature of his future development, nothing to prepare us for a narrative poet who should reach out to Chaucer in achievement and surpass all save his master in a form strangely neglected in English verse. The answer to the criticism that holds narrative poetry to be the humblest order of the art is to be made in two words—Chaucer, Morris. It is true that our narrative poety when set beside our dramatic and lyric wealth is, relatively, but a little store of great worth. But in the hands

of these two men the form attains a distinction that proves for ever that when employed with mastery it is capable of the noblest ends. Narrative poetry is, in fundamental intention, closely related to poetic drama, and its failure in most hands springs from the misunderstanding that has already been analysed in connection with *Sir Peter Harpdon's End.* It may be perfectly true to say that by his actions shall a man be known, but there is in the statement the implied qualification that such actions shall be normal and habitual; whilst the actions which narrative poety usually relates are extraordinary and irregular, exciting the interest momentarily only, and revealing nothing of the characters of the actors. Marlowe wrote a great narrative poem, and Marlowe was a great dramatist. One of the great *lacunæ* of literature is the play that Chaucer never wrote. Keats in at least two notable successes, small in compass but complete, Byron in work avowedly narrative in intention but largely lyrical in effect, and Scott in admirable stories that lacked something of the finer atmosphere of poetry, all made contributions of value to narrative poetry; Spenser moves with Milton across the boundary line into the region of epic. But until the publication of *Jason* there had been no poet since Chaucer who had pro-

duced a considerable volume of work at once frankly narrative in form and of indisputable greatness in design and achievement. The instinct that had guided Morris safely, or nearly so, through his dramatic experiment in his first volume did not forsake him when he turned to the creation of a great narrative poem, and it was precisely the instinct that was essential to success. For narrative is drama without the stage.

The first requirement that we make of the poet in narrative, after the paramount demand that he shall recognize this essential canon of all art as to the subservience of incident to idea, is that he shall be perfectly lucid. Whilst in lyric verse we are content to be forced at times to pause for thought and comprehension, in narrative verse we insist that we shall instantly perceive. With this condition Morris complies triumphantly. In *Jason*, as in the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, there is no necessity to pause at a single line. We read with absolute ease from beginning to end, and our interest is almost as absolute. Very occasionally the poet errs by introducing incidents merely for their own sake without intensifying our conception of character, but, with one or two possible exceptions, the tales move swiftly and develop on every page. That Morris should ever fail in this swiftness of

narration is, indeed, difficult to believe when we call to mind the innumerable instances where he conducts his story at an almost breathless speed. This is not to say that he is ever indistinct, either through bad craftsmanship or undue compression, but to emphasize his extreme reluctance to allow unnecessary events to distract our attention. An excellent instance is afforded in *The Ring Given to Venus.* Lawrence is told by Palumbus that he must leave him, fast and pray for six days, and return to him on the seventh, when he shall learn how to accomplish his end—the recovery of his bridal ring. The danger at such a juncture is obvious. We dread that the poet shall tell us at length of the passing of those six days, of Lawrence's impatience and distress, and so forth. That is to say, we should dread it of most poets, but, knowing Morris's methods, we feel that he will work more wisely, and we are not deceived. Palumbus' directions being given, Lawrence and his guide depart—

> So homeward doubtful went the twain,
> And Lawrence spent in fear and pain
> The six long days, and so at last,
> When the seventh sun was well-nigh past,
> Came to that dark man's fair abode;

and we are immediately on the full tide of the narrative again.

Morris further achieves that supreme distinc-

tion in narrative of indicating clearly at the outset what the issue is to be, and yet retaining our interest easily and completely. One of the most distinguished of living critics[1] has drawn attention to this power in Shakespeare; there is no vulgar endeavour to startle us by any surprising turns of character; what surprise there is to be will be found in the event. So deftly does the greatest of poets embody his characters at the moment when he brings them before us that we know instinctively how they will act in the events presented to us. In the case of Morris this power is, perhaps, even more strongly marked, for the reason that the web of circumstance that he folds round his people is of a far less subtle texture. It may be said, with but little exaggeration, that the sole emotions with which he is concerned are the love of man for woman, physical heroism, and the worship of external beauty. Again, it must be remembered that the simplicity implied by this statement is coloured and invested with the mystery of life itself by the temperament through which it is presented, but with this vital qualification the fact may be so set down. Nearly all his stories are cast in the same general outline: the desire of the lover, consummated or defeated only after long physical struggle and sacrifice; the

[1] Mr. Stopford Brooke.

inscrutable shadow of death looming behind attainment and failure alike; the progress of the narrative fashioned on a background where nature and art combine to please and soothe with an endless pageant of loveliness. *The Life and Death of Jason* may, perhaps, be advanced as an instance disproving this contention, but a moment's reflection shows that the central interest of the poem, the interest by the side of which all else recedes into the position of that pageantry, is the love of Jason and Medea. The quest of the Golden Fleece, the adventures of the heroes, the treachery of Pelias, these things, exquisitely handled as they are, are but the canvas upon which is thrown a sublime and elemental love story. The finest book of the poem, the last, wherein is told nothing but the triumph and withering of that love, is not only on a level with Morris's own highest achievement, but among the supreme things in poetry. The hopeless yet unutterably poignant figure of Medea; the tenderness and the untutored simplicity of Glance, the child who is the tragic plaything of the deeper and more world-beaten natures against whom she is thrown; the desperate self-deception of Jason and the terrible degradation of his essential nobility—these are drawn with an intensity, at once fierce and restrained, that bears witness to

the height that narrative poetry may attain in the hands of a master.

Not only is the substance of these poems of this transparently simple texture, but the form of expression created by Morris is so specially fitted for the purpose that the structures as a whole stand almost without parallel for precision of outline and clearness of detail. He appears to have determined that neither overloading of diction and imagery nor intricacy of metrical effect should interfere with the conduct of his narrative. Having no superficially subtle or complex statement to make, and keeping always before him the purpose to produce a memorable cumulative effect without striving at all for isolated felicities of phrasing, he is never forced to pause for the fitting word. The words that go to the making of a line flow as naturally and certainly from his pen as the letters that fashion a word from the pen of another. Nowhere are there any signs of labour; nowhere the tumultuous glory of language that rushes at times from the lips of more variable if not greater poets; and yet, with the rarest exceptions, he nowhere descends from his own high level. For sheer consistency of excellence he probably has no rival. The supremacy of his narrative poems lies in the fact that Morris achieved what he attempted completely and with perfect ease. As

in his life, so in his poetry do we feel that we are in the presence of a titanic strength that is never exerting itself to the utmost; and we are constantly being led, in consequence, to that exercise of the imagination which creates the most potent sympathy between the artist and his audience.

I have spoken of a certain easy decorative elaboration that Morris uses in these stories, and it is this quality that has led many people into a misunderstanding of his poetry. To say that a poet is swift in narration does not necessarily mean that his sole purpose is to get the story finished in the least possible time, but that the narrative is unimpeded at the moments when most we demand its progress. To say that this is the only right method would involve enquiry into notable instances where it is not employed, which would be to digress unduly, but most of Scott's novels might be advanced as examples. There we are constantly brought to a standstill at vital points in the conduct of the story whilst some thread that has been laid aside is again taken up, again to be dropped when it has been drawn to a point in common with the rest of the development. This Morris never does; the sequence of his narrative is always direct, and the crises of his story are always carried through at a stroke. But in

observing this condition of emphasizing his most momentous periods in a perfectly logical continuity and boldness of statement, he does not deny himself the right to fill in the spaces between those periods with the large ease and contemplative calm which have their corresponding manifestations in life. Hannibal was not momentarily adding leaves to his laurels. And Jason journeying from Thessaly to Colchis finds many adventures, and Morris records them with vigour and intensity and the sound of swords; but he finds, too, pleasant days of even enjoyment and companionship with his fellows, when they move delightedly about a new countryside or see for the first time some storied place or gather together to talk of their homeland. And these are days that Morris is not at all content to leave unsung, and his instinct is perfectly sound. It is strange that these lovely interludes that lie between adventure and adventure should ever be, as they often are, called "languid." They denote, on the contrary, a spiritual activity astonishing in its range and sanity. For they imply a recognition on the part of the poet that to pass down a river on a golden afternoon, or to lie beneath the stars at night, or to move beneath the walls of an unknown city whilst memories of home and kin crowd on the mind, is an experience as

adventurous as the riding of a storm or the winning of a Golden Fleece. To be languid is to be indifferent, and indifference in the presence of anything not wholly alienated from nature and simple humanity was the last thing of which Morris was capable. So that when Medea has to go from her home to the wood, the poet is not forgetful of the path by which she has to go. His eyes are always open.

> . . . a blind pathway leads
> Betwixt the yellow corn and whispering reeds,
> The home of many a shy quick-diving bird;
> Thereby they passed, and as they went they heard
> Splashing of fish, and ripple of the stream;
> And once they saw across the water's gleam
> The black boat of some fisher of the night. . . .

To travel in the company of one whose senses are so vitally responsive to every sound and sight of beauty, to every tremor of emotion that may show itself in the people whom we meet on the wayside, demands no small spiritual alertness in ourselves. But if we fail to keep pace with his glorious and inexhaustible curiosity, if our joy is not sane and unjaded as his, it will not mend our case to call him languid. It is we who lack energy, not he. Every man is quick-witted in the ranks of battle or the sack of cities; the true test of his vitality is to see whether he remains so under the orchard boughs or in the walk from his doorstep to the

market-place, Our position in this matter is but the logical issue of a social condition against which the whole of Morris's life and art were a revolt. Most of us have made the working hours of the day a burden to be borne merely for the sake of the wage that follows; the work itself is to us no more than a weariness. It is not necessary to examine here the economic causes of this result, but the result itself is obvious enough. And in consequence we call for the intervals between work and work to be filled either by strange excitement or sleep. And so we pass from lethargy through more or less violent sensations to forgetfulness. Morris would have none of this. Work meant for him, as it must mean for us all once more before we regain our sanity and wholesomeness, a constant sense of joy in self-expression, heightened now and again, as it were, by the salt and sting of great adventures. Into this scheme of life are admitted seasons of quiet contemplation, of responsiveness to such common things as the beauty of the clouds or the soft sound of earth breaking to the plough, hours when all the simple and recurrent bounties of the day are accepted joyfully and without question. Into his poetry Morris translated all these; the great adventures, the deep sense of the satisfaction of labour, and the quiet moods. Our

faculties may be so weakened that they are stirred by the great adventures alone; but it is no fault of the poet's if we confuse his calm and reflective exaltation with our own lethargy.

In speaking of the *Guenevere* volume it was necessary to examine the poems more or less in detail and separately, for they were the changing expressions of a creative mind not yet sure of itself, of a temperament that had not yet found its philosophic moorings. Throughout *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, however, we have a unity of vision, a gathering up of all things into the terms of one personal reading of life, that make it possible to speak of them more generally and with less qualification from word to word. Having defined the nature of the form that Morris was using in these poems and his particular manner of handling it, we may try to realize the view of the world that he was seeking to present. We may pass from the announcement to the discovery itself. Morris in his poetry simplified his aim enormously by steadily eliminating two things—enquiry into the unknown, and all endeavour to 'set the crooked straight.' When he called himself 'Dreamer of dreams born out of my due time' and asked 'Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?' he was not, again

let it be said, refusing to face the world about him, but announcing that as poet his concern was not to destroy but to create. And whatever good results might attend the speculation of others as to death and the secret purposes of God, he felt that for him, at least, it was unprofitable employment. The issue of this purpose is that we have a world wherein all the simple but positive things stand out shining in the light of a highly-organized creative temperament, undimmed by questioning doubt on the one hand or a cloud of superficial intricacies of circumstance on the other. In his later socialist teaching Morris sought in some means to show how these intricacies might be cleared away in practice, but in his poetry he presupposes a life where the natural impulses of men are unfettered by all save eternal circumstance. His philosophy becomes one of extraordinary directness and simplicity, and yet it retains everything by which the spirit and body of man really have their being. To love, and if needs be to battle for love, to labour and find labour the one unchanging delight, to be intimate with all the moods and seasons of earth, to be generous alike in triumph and defeat, to fear death and yet to be heroic in the fear, to be the heirs of sin and sorrow in so far as these things were the outcome of events that were permanent and

not ephemeral in their nature—of such did he conceive the state of men to be in the earthly paradise that he was tying to create in his art. We are yet far from realizing the state. The din of the thousand claims of the crooked to be set straight is loud in our ears, and the cleansing of the moment must be done. But not until we can accustom ourselves to the thought that this state is, if not yet realized, at least realizable, can we hope to work out any salvation for ourselves or the world. We suffer daily from a neglect of the positive and creative for the negative and destructive. In England the symbols of our national thought are curiously expressive of this fact. We decorate and honour our soldiers whose business, be it to destroy or to be destroyed, is, in any case, connected with destruction; those of our lawyers who are chiefly concerned with restraint and punishment; our politicians who spend their time protecting us from assaults of neighbours and communities as commercially rapacious as ourselves, or, in their more enlightened moments, in adjusting wrongs that are the dregs in the cup of civilization. The functions of these men may be necessities of society, but they nevertheless apply to the small negative aspect of our state and not the great normal life. It is that which is, rightly, the concern of our creative artists; but our creative

artists are not decorated and honoured by the nation as such. Occasionally when Europe has insisted long enough on the presence of a great artist among us, we make some belated recognition of the fact, and occasionally we become sentimental and throw a few pounds a year to a poet whom we refuse to pay proper wages for his work. This of course does not injure the artist, but it is all very eloquent as to the frame of our national mind. However many noble individual exceptions there may be, the fact remains that nationally we acclaim the negative and neglect the positive manifestations of man. Morris's art was, implicitly, a challenge to this temper and a means of escape from it. For, despite all the clamour that the good and evil voices of the destroyers make, we are ultimately forced back to the admission that they fill only a very small corner of our lives. The daily charities and heroisms, the discipline of fellowship and love, the worship of beauty and the pride of shaping with hand and brain, are all independent of them, and they are the justification of life. If we have crowded them out of our daily courses, then it is for the poets to lead us back to them. This they do most certainly, not by denouncing us for our folly or reviling the evil to which we have fallen, but by showing us, in being, our lost estate. This Morris did, and to understand this

is to understand the root and flower of his philosophy as poet.

It is not to be supposed that the world of Morris's poetry is a world purged of error. He did not imagine an ideal humanity, but a humanity drawn from all the finer phases of experience, its vision free of the veils of a highly artificial social state. It is a common thing to hear people express surprise that men who behave towards each other with bitter animosity in business or official or political life are on generous and friendly terms in their homes or in what is called private life, and the solution is generally offered that whilst they differ fiercely on profoundly vital subjects, they can afford to be tolerant and even generous to each other in less important matters. The solution is, of course, as far astray from facts as it could be. The truth is that in the conduct of the things that are of permanent significance these men behave to each other generally with the innate nobility of humanity, and at times with humanity's natural imperfection. There is among them a deep sense of comradeship and common delight, broken only at times by the reaction of emotions not yet wholly chastened, expressing itself in a violation of conflicting interests. But when these same men are brought into contact in surroundings compact

of that artificiality of which I have spoken, those surroundings create a hundred new and shifting standards, and with them as many strange little jealousies and rancours which are stifled immediately simple humanity is once again allowed its proper dominion. The sin and the sorrow that are the issue of this imperfection in humanity Morris uses at their full and tragic values in his poetry, but to the nervous irritation which is as some new disease which we have invented for ourselves unaided by the gods he paid no heed. This is why his poetry, all its vitality and strength notwithstanding, is so peaceful. His people may suffer great troubles and deal hard blows, love passionately and lose fiercely, but at no time do they move with the confused unrest of men who are never sure of themselves, having between their vision and the world a thousand petty accidents of will. They are deep-lunged, but they never babble and chatter; they have enormous energy but are never restless.

As though to emphasize the singleness of his aim in these poems, Morris uses the simplest verse-forms. *Jason* is written in heroic couplets, the prologue and seven tales of *The Earthly Paradise* in the same measure, seven tales in octosyllabic couplets and ten in seven-lined Chaucerian stanzas. Metrical experiments

occasionally make some definite addition to poetry, but they more often result in mere formlessness. The wide acceptance of certain forms by the poets through centuries of practice does not point to any lack of invention or weak servility on the part of the poets, but to some inherent fitness in the forms. Tradition is a fetter only to the weak; it is the privilege of the sovereign poet to invest it with his own personality and make it distinctively his own. From Marlowe down to Mr. Yeats the heroic couplet has been a new vehicle in the hands of new poets, and its vigour is unimpaired. Morris in accepting proved forms merely accepted the responsibility of proving himself. The result is never for a moment in doubt—his use of the ten and eight syllable line and the stanza that he took from his master is as clearly pervaded by his own temperament as is his vision itself. It is one of the subtlest faculties of genius, this shaping of a manner which shall chime exactly with mood and emotional outlook. Just as Shakespeare's expression is prodigal in strength and variety, and Milton's full of weight and dignity, and Pope's marked at all points by precision, and Shelley's by a wild and fluctuating speed, so Morris's is everywhere animated by a pure and virile loveliness and an all-suffusing sense of pity. His utterance is in

perfect harmony with his spiritual temper. We have seen that whilst he accepts the tragedy of the world at its full value as something fundamental and inseparable from humanity, he rejects the mere ugliness of the world as being an artificial product of an abnormal state. And so, when he has to write of a dead woman lying in a peasant's hut in all the circumstances of extreme poverty, he does so with tragic intensity whilst eliminating all the inessential ugliness. Poverty as we know it in our civilization makes an unlovely bedfellow for death, yet Morris shows it to us with a precision almost fierce in its fidelity to truth, yet beautiful because concerned with the simple and essential only—

> On straw the poor dead woman lay;
> The door alone let in the day,
> Showing the trodden earthen floor,
> A board on trestles weak and poor,
> Three stumps of tree for stool or chair,
> A half-glazed pipkin, nothing fair,
> A bowl of porridge by the wife,
> Untouched by lips that lacked for life,
> A platter and a bowl of wood;
> And in the further corner stood
> A bow cut from the wych-elm tree,
> A holly club and arrows three
> Ill pointed, heavy, spliced with thread.

This passage is a typical example of Morris's manner. It shows the occasional hastiness of composition that is found at intervals through-

out his work; 'door' and 'board' in the second and fourth lines strike unpleasingly on the ear that is carrying the rhyme 'floor—poor.' But it also shows the individuality with which Morris handles at all times a well-tried measure; it shows, too, the ease with which he conveys a certain atmospheric significance apart from his actual statement, and, finally, it shows his exquisite sense of word-values and his extraordinary power of visualization. No poet has given more beautiful expression to the sensuous delight of the eye than Morris, and even here, where the mood is one of profound sorrow, the thing seen is described with a sweetness and naturalness that makes it bearable; indeed, more than bearable, something that we gladly remember. In this matter Morris, as we should expect, worked always in the greatest tradition of art; his most terrible and tragic moments are never moments that we wish to forget.

In a paper called *Churches of Northern France* that Morris contributed to "The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine," he talks about Amiens Cathedral. He imagines it first as it would look from one of the steeples of the town. 'It rises up from the ground, grey from the paving of the street, the cavernous porches of the west front opening wide, and marvellous with the shadows of the carving you can only

guess at; and above stand the kings, and above that you would see the twined mystery of the great flamboyant rose window with its thousand openings, and the shadows of the flower-work carved round it; then the grey towers and gable, grey against the blue of the August sky; and behind them all, rising high into the quivering air, the tall spire over the crossing.' And then again, as you approach, 'the great apse rises over you with its belt of eastern chapel; first the long slim windows of these chapels, which are each of them little apses, the Lady Chapel projecting a good way beyond the rest; and then, running under the cornice of the chapels and outer aisles all round the church, a cornice of great noble leaves; then the parapets in changing flamboyant patterns; then the conical roofs of the chapels hiding the exterior tracery of the triforium; then the great clerestory windows, very long, of four lights, and stilted, the tracery beginning a long way below the springing of their arches. And the buttresses are so thick, and their arms spread so here, that each of the clerestory windows looks down its own space between them as if between walls. Above the windows rise their canopies running through the parapet; and above all the great mountainous roof, and all below it and around the windows and walls of the choir and apse

stands the mighty army of the buttresses, holding up the weight of the stone roof within with their strong arms for ever.' Then, having set down the cumulative effect of the great Gothic structure in these few strokes, he goes on to examine the beauties of its detail, the carving on the screens and doors, the figures on the tombs, the mouldings and little stories in stone, all of them the vital expressions of the joy of some nameless craftsman in his work. Apart from the side light that these descriptions throw on Morris's view of art, we are reminded as we read them of the architectural design of *The Earthly Paradise*. It has precisely the qualities of a Gothic cathedral. The whole scheme of the poem, which contrives the alternate narration of stories drawn from classic and romantic sources, carrying the process along the months of the year and setting the whole in a purely lyrical framework, results in a massive general effect which must be once seen before we can wholly realize the beauty of the stories by themselves. But once seen it is never forgotten, and afterwards we are content to return again and again to the detail, as certain of finding satisfaction in any of the single stories on which we may chance as we are in the tracery of the cloisters or the devices on the stalls of a Gothic church. It is, of course, the peculiar glory of Gothic—or

romantic—art, that while the parts combine to make a whole more wonderful than themselves, they yet have an independent beauty and completeness of their own. Morris in writing his tales was careful never to sacrifice his general outline for the sake of momentary effects, but each story is complete in itself and separable from the rest.

Although it is to be accounted as a virtue to Morris that he never sought to decorate his verse with jewels that should distract attention from the whole texture, it must always be remembered that he was absolved from the necessity of doing this because the texture itself was of extraordinary richness and shot with a hundred colours. The first and most obvious danger in a long narrative poem is that many passages which are concerned with the mere statement of fact necessary to the progress of the story will not be poetry at all. But moving always, as it were, in the open country of the world, away from everything that is not intimately related to that simplicity of life that has been discussed, Morris is never forced to conduct his people over moments that are fundamentally incapable of poetic treatment. Their most commonplace actions are still carried through with the vividness that comes of a constant joy in labour and direct contact with the earth. A journey means

the building of a boat and shaping of oars, and a loaf of bread is the direct witness of corn harvested and ground, and wood gathered for the fire. An instance may be taken almost at random : Jason and his warriors find that their progress is stopped, and that their ship must be borne across the land. It is just such a moment as might, in the hands of a poet who was only anxious to get the matter done to comply with the necessities of his narrative, sink from poetry altogether. This is how Morris manages it :—

> And there all,
> Half deafened by the noises of the fall
> And bickering rapids, left the ashen oar,
> And spreading over the well-wooded shore
> Cut rollers, laying on full many a stroke,
> And made a capstan of a mighty oak,
> And so drew Argo up, with hale and how,
> On to the grass, turned half to mire now.
>
> Thence did they toil their best, in drawing her
> Beyond the falls, whereto being come anear,
> They trembled when they saw them ; for from sight
> The rocks were hidden by the spray-clouds white,
> Cold, wretched, chilling, and the mighty sound
> Their heavy-laden hearts did sore confound ;
> For parted from all men they seemed, and far
> From all the world, shut out by that great bar.
>
> Moreover, when with toil and pain, at last
> Unto the torrent's head they now had passed,
> They sent forth swift Ætalides to see
> What farther up the river there might be.
> Who, going twenty leagues, another fall
> Found, with great cliffs on each side, like a wall ;

> But 'twixt the two, another unbarred stream
> Joined the main river; therefore did they deem,
> When this they heard, that they perforce must try
> This smoother branch; so somewhat heavily
> Argo they launched again, and got them forth
> Still onward toward the winter and the north.

This is writing on a level below which Morris never falls, and it is yet on the side of poetry. It is possible for the artist's temperament to throw beauty on to an object in itself unlovely, and the result is often some confusion of mind as to the real source of the beauty. Mr. Brangwyn can draw men stripped to the waist toiling in the inferno of a black-country ironworks, and his creation is beautiful. Emile Verhaeren can strike a song out of the utter degradation of humanity: but the essential poetry in each case is in the soul of the artist and not in the subject of his contemplation. If our knowledge of the ironworks rested wholly on Mr. Brangwyn's report we might well believe that it really was strangely and strongly beautiful. But if we really know the ironworks itself, we know that it is hideously ugly, using men half as beasts, half as machines, choking the air and wounding the earth, a thing definitely unpoetic because definitely a denial of life. Morris worked in quite another manner. Instead of lending ugliness the undeserved beauty and colour of his own temperament,

he stripped all things that came into his vision of all that was inessential, all the excrescences of accident and will, and then allowed them in their renewed simplicity to find natural and direct expression. The result is that although it may be true to say that Morris has fewer single lines which are memorable if detached from their context than any other poet at all comparable to him in achievement, it is equally true to say that he stands alone in the creation of a great body of work that moves consistently and surely on the plane of poetry from first to last with scarcely a single lapse. No poet has ever had a more infallible instinct as to what was and what was not of the stuff of poetry.

With *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris establishes his claim to greatness. The height of his power is not yet reached, but here already we have a breadth of design, an intensity of perception, and a sureness of utterance about which there can be no question. Not only does he prove himself to be a narrative poet of the first rank, but in the songs and interludes he attains a sweetness and tenderness which if not matchless are certainly not surpassed. Things like—

> I know a little garden close
> Set thick with lily and red rose,—

and

> Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing—

and

> O June, O June, that we desired so,
> Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?—

—it is, indeed, unnecessary to add example to example—are of the highest order of lyric poetry. The lusty strength and naked passion of *Sigurd the Volsung* are as yet unattempted at any sustained pressure, but in all other respects the achievement of *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* is complete and representative. Remembering Pope's "awful Aristarch"—

> Thy mighty Scholiast, whose unweary'd pains
> Made Horace dull, and humbled Milton's strains.
> Turn what they will to Verse, their toil is vain,
> Critics like me shall make it Prose again—

I have refrained from any attempt to re-tell the stories that must be read as Morris told them or not at all. It has been my purpose rather to hold for a moment in trembling hands the spirit that is in them and that went to their creation.

At the time of publication of the last volume of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris had begun the study of Icelandic story that was to find its splendid culmination six years later in *Sigurd the Volsung*. The history of these beginnings will be told more fitly later in connection with

the consideration of that poem. The completion of his great cycle of tales left him momentarily with a sense of purposelessness. 'I feel rather lost at having done my book,' he writes. 'I must try to get something serious to do as soon as may be . . . perhaps something else of importance will turn up soon.' He turned again to painting, and occupied some of his time in book-illumination, an art in which he attained a perfection no less memorable than that of the mediæval masters. The business of Morris and Company was developing rapidly, and in 1871 he found a new interest in Kelmscott House, the old manor in Oxfordshire that was to be his country home until his death. The abiding pleasure that his retreat afforded him has been beautifully pictured for us in Mr. Mackail's "Life." In the same year he made his first journey to Iceland, and on his return he wrote the poem, which is next to be considered, *Love is Enough*.

V

LOVE IS ENOUGH AND SIGURD THE VOLSUNG

Discipleship in art is a thing very commonly misunderstood. The poet with centuries of activity behind him will inevitably find in this voice or that an expression with which his own temperament is in more or less direct sympathy, and, if his nature be not cramped, he will make full acknowledgment of the fact. But this loving recognition of fellowship has nothing whatever to do with imitation. In demanding originality of the poet we do not expect him to sing as though he moved in an untrodden world. We might as reasonably ask each man to invent a new speech ; we should be doing no more than carrying our demand to its logical issue. We insist, and rightly, that the poet shall interpret experience for us in the terms of his own personality, but we must remember that the work of his predecessors is an enormously important part of experience, and when he finds some aspect of that work in correspondence with his

own adventures he will, quite naturally, take it up in some measure into his own creation. Confusion in this matter has led to considerable injustice in many estimates of Morris. His repeated announcements of Chaucer as his master and his open allegiance throughout his life to certain phases of mediæval art, have caused it to be said that his mood and expression are alike archaic, the word being used to mean obsolete. As to the mood, the suggestion is so preposterous as to be unworthy of an answer; it is obsolete just in so far as the fundamental things of life are obsolete. As to expression, Morris's free use of such words as 'certes,' 'Fair sir,' 'I trow,' and so forth is supposed to lend support to the suggestion. It does nothing of the kind, of course. Morris uses these words not for their especial value, but as simply and naturally as he does the common parts of speech. The words in themselves are perfectly fit for use in poetry, and the discredit into which they may have fallen is entirely due to inferior writers who have sought to make them in themselves substitutes for poetry. To rule that their abuse henceforth makes their proper use impossible is, however, absurd. It may be discreet in a poet to-day to avoid nymphs and Diana and the pipes of Pan, but to say beforehand that his traffic with these will be disastrous is merely to

lay ourselves open to the most salutary correction at any moment. Morris used words such as those of which I have spoken without hesitation, but he always subordinated them to their right offices, and their influence in either direction upon his general manner is negligible.

This question arises more naturally in the discussion of *Love is Enough* than elsewhere. Superficially the play may be said to be an attempt to reconstruct the spirit and, in a smaller degree, the form of the early English morality, but close consideration of the play necessitates qualification of this statement at almost every step. The resemblance in form is to be found not in the structure but in the alliterative verse that Morris uses for the central action of the play. But even in the verse there are qualities that belong to Morris alone; he not only discarded rhyme, which was employed by Bale and the unknown poets of an earlier day in their interludes and mysteries, but he brought to his lines a greater regularity and fulness. The pauses that play so important a part in the early alliterative verse are replaced by syllabic values, and the shortening of lines is far less arbitrary than in his models. The result, especially of the added fulness, is that a certain bare simplicity is lost, and curiously enough this poem, where he was influenced by a form that

with all its faults has an extraordinary directness and incisiveness of statement, is the most difficult among all his works to read. The long lines with their constant tightening up of syllables are frequently too heavy for the statement. Many passages are of great beauty, as for example:—

As my twin sister, young of years was she and slender,
Yellow blossoms of spring-tide her hands had been gathering,
But the gown-lap that held them had fallen adown
And had lain round her feet with the first of the singing;
Now her singing had ceased, though yet heaved her bosom
As with lips lightly parted and eyes of one seeking
She stood face to face with the Love that she knew not,
The love that she longed for and waited unwitting . . .

and there are numberless lines where the precision of statement is admirable, as—

In memory of days when my meat was but little
And my drink drunk in haste between saddle and straw . . .

and

I saw her
Stealing barefoot, bareheaded amidst of the tulips
Made grey by the moonlight . . .

but the experiment in a form that is not now, after four centuries of development, really natural to the language is, on the whole, a failure. It is, indeed, true that as we read through it the measure becomes more acceptable to the ear, but there is a difficulty in the outline which no familiarity can wholly overcome.

The structure of the play is mainly of Morris's own invention, and is of singular beauty. The figure of Love, who may be said to correspond roughly to the Doctor or Messenger of the early moralities, stands, not between the action and the audience, but between the action and the people of an outer play; and, again, beyond this we have a further group. The structure is, briefly, this. The morality itself; Love and The Music who act as spiritual interpreters and as chorus between the action and the Emperor and Empress for whom the townsfolk are having the play performed; and finally the peasants Giles and Joan who are equally interested in the play and its imaginary spectators, translate the spiritual commentaries of Love and The Music into terms of their own simple workaday existence, and, lastly, act in some sort as chorus between the whole representation and the actual audience. There is a subtlety of design in all this that reaches far beyond the conceptions of the sombre and rugged poets of pre-Shakespearean England, and although the play fails in other respects, Morris here shows more clearly even than in *Sir Peter Harpdon's End* that he understood the exact meaning of the element contributed by the chorus to drama more fully than any poet of recent times.

In the central action, the morality itself, there

are three principal figures, Pharamond the King, Oliver his old counsellor and foster-father, and Azalais. Morris retains the method of his models in that these figures are not characters but rather abstractions. Pharamond is not so much a man as mankind, Everyman. Oliver is much more definitely a personality, but he is used as a symbol of the better nature of man, not able quite to understand spiritual nobility, but content, even eager, to follow it. Azalais is Love, both giving and taking. The motive of the play is stated clearly in the title, Love is Enough. Pharamond leaves kingship, fame, everything, and sets out to find this thing only, and in finding it proves and finds himself. But we must return to the motive a little later. The point next to be considered is this symbolic use of figures in action. The method of the old poets was to invest these figures at the outset with a certain presupposed and generally accepted significance, and to start from that point. They did not attempt to explain what Luxury, Riot, Riches, Knowledge, Humility and Charity were, but simply gave these names to their figures and trusted their audience to fill in the outlines. Then taking a central figure as protagonist, Everyman or Youth or some such symbol, they brought him into contact with the rest and allowed all the emotion of the play to arise

out of the transition of his moods as he is influenced by them in turn. There is never the least doubt as to the lines along which each of these figures will work; they carry their natures in their names. We know that Pride will betray Youth as surely as we know that his Knowledge and Good Deeds alone will bide with Everyman. But there is nothing dramatic in the spectacle of Pride forsaking Youth until we see the complementary loyalty of Charity and Humility, and we are moved by the tenderness of Good Deeds and Knowledge towards Everyman simply because we have just seen Strength and Beauty desert him in his need. These transitions of mood are carried through with consistent swiftness and are defined by the direct contact of the figures, not by reflective comment, or only so in a subordinate degree. *Everyman*, which is the crown of these early plays, realizes these conditions most perfectly. The protagonist is commanded to make his reckoning before God. He asks Fellowship to accompany him on his journey through Death's gates. Fellowship refuses, and so in turn do Goods, Kindred, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits, and the rest of them, as we knew they would. Then he is aided by Knowledge, Good Deeds and Confession, and sets out content. Save for the few speeches that summarize the

situation from time to time, there is absolutely no comment on the development of the play; the whole effect depends on the swift passage from one crude symbol to another. Within its own limitations, this simple method not only succeeded in holding the audience for whom it was first employed, but is completely effective to-day. The Elizabethan drama threw it aside to make room for its own greater glories, but it is not impossible that a great poet should yet return to it, and with the accumulated wisdom of the poets who have worked since then in his blood, refashion it into something of a strange new beauty. In *Love is Enough* Morris adopted it only to a point, and failed in consequence. He set out to enunciate a definite lesson, and he invested his figures with symbolic significance, but he carried the method no further. Pharamond, instead of passing swiftly from stage to stage in pursuit of his end and showing us that love is enough, pauses for long periods to tell us that love is enough. His speeches are, generally, lyrical developments of one theme, and wholly beautiful as many of them are as such they destroy the cohesion of the play as a whole. The design of *Love is Enough* is no wider in its scope than that of "Everyman," indeed not so wide, and yet the play is, roughly, three times as long. I am

not, of course, attempting any comparison of the spirit of the two plays; there is no point at which this is possible; my comparison is merely between the uses to which they employ the same method.

Herein, it seems to me, lies the failure of *Love is Enough* in so far as it is a failure at all. The central part of the design is so carried out as to disturb the general balance. It was not necessary for Morris to choose this particular form for his inner play, but having done so he was mistaken in not observing its principles more closely. But, having said this, it is necessary to add that in many ways *Love is Enough* stands with Morris's finest achievements in poetry. In the morality of Pharamond itself, and apart from all difficulties of the verse-form, there is love-poetry that is scarcely to be surpassed in its depth and tenderness. In this play Morris departed from his usual ways. His narrative and epic writing and his lyrics have nothing of that didacticism which if not essential is at least proper to the greatest art. Art confesses to no limitations. In *Love is Enough*, however, he allowed himself this new privilege, and he translates his teaching into art with perfect instinct. Here, as throughout his work, it is impossible to point to any passage and say, "that is not poetry," and yet speech

after speech is as specifically didactic as the Sermon on the Mount. In the words of Pharamond, in the stately heroic couplets spoken by Love, and in the exquisite stanzas of The Music he pursues the same theme, and over and over again he carries it to a sublime pitch of intensity.

> What, Faithful—do I lie, that overshot
> My dream-web is with that which happeneth not?
> Nay, nay, believe it not!—love lies alone
> In loving hearts like fire within the stone:
> Then strikes my hand, and lo, the flax ablaze!
> —Those tales of empty striving and lost days
> Folk tell of sometimes—never lit my fire
> Such ruin as this; but Pride and Vain-desire,
> My counterfeits and foes, have done the deed.
> Beware, Beloved! for they sow the weed
> Where I the wheat: they meddle where I leave,
> Take what I scorn, cast by what I receive,
> Sunder my yoke, yoke that I would dissever,
> Pull down the house my hands would build for ever.

In this poem, too, we find the isolated instances wherein Morris makes some allusion to the desire for seeing beyond the veils of our existence, some suggestion of the hope of spring when leaves are falling. Even here there is none of the exultant certainty of the *Ode to the West Wind*, but a quiet fearlessness that is no less inspiring and consoling in its way—

Live on, for Love liveth, and earth shall be shaken
By the wind of his wings on the triumphing morning,
When the dead and their deeds that die not shall awaken,
And the world's tale shall sound in your trumpet of warning,
And the sun smite the banner called Scorn of the Scorning,
And dead pain ye shall trample, dead fruitless desire,
As ye wend to pluck out the new world from the fire.

And again—

In what wise, ah, in what wise shall it be?
How shall the bark that girds the winter tree
Babble about the sap that sleeps beneath,
And tell the fashion of its life and death?
How shall my tongue in speech man's longing wrought
Tell of the things whereof he knoweth nought?
Should I essay it might ye understand
How those I love shall share my promised land!
Then must I speak of little things as great,
Then must I tell of love and call it hate,
Then must I bid you seek what all men shun,
Reward defeat, praise deeds that were not done.

The Emperor and Empress who watch the play point its moral for themselves, and their somewhat remote humanity serves admirably as a step between the pure poetry of the central action and the homespun reality of Giles and Joan. They send gifts to the actors of Pharamond and Azalais, and then the Emperor—

Fain had I been
To see him face to face and his fair Queen,
And thank him friendly, asking him maybe
How the world looks to one with love set free;

It may not be, for as thine eyes say, sweet,
Few folk as friends shall unfreed Pharamond meet.
So is it: we are lonelier than those twain,
Though from their vale they ne'er depart again.

But Giles and his wife are under no such restraint of state; they will bid the players to their home and be their scholars for a while

In many a lesson of sweet lore
To learn love's meaning more and more,

and the scene between the two peasants that ends the play is an idyll full of the simple fragrance and humanity and earth-love that were the crowning splendours of *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*.

In 1869 the poet had published his translation of the *Grettir Saga*, carried out in collaboration with Eiríkr Magnússon, and this was followed in the next year by the *Völsunga Saga* from the same hands. Morris's feeling for the northern stories had already found expression in more than one of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, notably 'The Lovers of Gudrun,' and the Icelandic visit of 1871 was followed by a second in 1873. In 1875 he published *Three Northern Love Stories*, translations of extraordinary directness and conviction, and these six years of study of and service to the curiously neglected story of the northern race

were now approaching their culminating triumph. To examine these various preliminary essays in detail here is neither possible nor necessary. The journals of the travel in Iceland, written as they were without any definite purpose of publication, show how intensely he was moved by the spirit of the Sagas, how close his own being was to it. Every stone was quick with a tradition that meant for him the very breath of splendid and heroic life. His feeling for the earth was at all times, as we have seen, one of an almost indefinable tenderness and yearning, but once he had seen Iceland it was the earth that nourished Sigurd and Brynhild and Gunnar and Gudrun that was thenceforth most deeply rooted in his love. The austere beauty and gloomy strength of the Icelandic countryside were from that time sacred things in his imagination, and it was, perhaps, not without taking thought that in the first poem that he wrote on his return he made Pharamond, when trying to recall the country to which he must again turn to find the end of his seeking, say that

> ever meseemeth
> 'Twas not in the Southlands.

In the preface to the translation of the *Völsunga Saga*, the last paragraph says:—

> 'In conclusion, we must again say how strange it seems to us, that this Volsung Tale, which is in fact a universified poem, should never have been translated into English. For this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks—to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than the name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that came after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.'

That was in 1870. Now, five years later, with the whole story matured in his mind, with its appeal quickened by the exploration of its landscape, he determined to gather up its essential features and fuse them through his own temperament into a new completeness both of substance and music. It was a tremendous undertaking, both in its actual difficulties and its responsibility. Morris was not likely to hesitate before the difficulties, but he realized perfectly the danger of attempting to reshape a story which, as it stood, he reverenced as the greatest in the world. To have done it ill or in any way other than excellently would have been an unpardonable sin against himself. The risk was taken, and *The Story of Sigurd, The Volsung, and the Fall of the Niblungs* was published in 1876. It is not only the supreme achievement of a great poet,

but one of the very great poems of the modern world.

The story of Sigurd, showing in the beginning the Volsung heritage to which he is born and in the end the fall of the Niblung house that comes of his death, with his life set between these, satisfies the requirements of epic poetry as, perhaps, does no other. We have the first necessities of architectural form satisfied—the beginning, the development, the close. Then in the main theme, the life of Sigurd, we have a story of men and women living under normal conditions. They are, indeed, the conditions of a heroic world, but the central events of the tale are controlled not by abnormal circumstance or artificial conditions, but by fundamental human emotions. Behind these events we have a landscape that is in direct imaginative correspondence with the character of the people—that has gone to the shaping of this character. This is a matter of peculiar importance. When, in poetry, the scene of action moves freely from one country to another, as it does, for example, in "Childe Harold," the landscape becomes merely an ornament, but when the scene is fixed and the characters move consistently in their own homeland, then the landscape becomes a corporate part of the poem's significance. Sigurd would be the less Sigurd away from his grey

mountains and unpeopled heaths and the dusk of his pine-woods. And then finally we have the will set over man's will suffusing the whole in the intangible yet tremendous sense of Fate, the Wrath and Sorrow of Odin.

It has been said that in opening the poem with the tale of Sigmund, Sigurd's father, and the destruction of the Volsungs Morris imperilled the unity of his epic, if indeed he did not destroy it. When a critic of Mr. Mackail's distinction and proved insight makes a pronouncement we can differ from him only with the greatest respect, and knowing that ultimately these things are not fixed, being variable as men's understandings. It seems to me, then, that this first book, called Sigmund, is the inevitable opening of the epic of Sigurd. Not because, as another critic suggests, it forms a background of mystery and heroic terror upon which to throw the more human story that follows, but because it introduces the whole motive of that story. One does not wish to stray into polemics, but here again I must dissent from another writer, Miss May Morris, and again I do so with full appreciation of the value of those introductions of which I have already spoken. Miss Morris also points out that this first book 'introduces the very motive of the epic,' but she identifies that motive with the Wrath and

Sorrow of Odin. But the motive is in reality the splendid survival of one brand plucked from the ashes of the Volsung house; the avenging, not in blood, but in the one swift arc of Sigurd's heroic life in a world wherein he stands magnificently alone, of the Volsung name. The sense of Fate, the wide horizons, the sinister figure of Grimhild and the terrors of the Glittering Heath are all alike influences that work upon the shaping of this central theme, and to confuse them with the motive itself makes it impossible to see clearly the rightful place of the book of Sigmund in the poem. It is there that the disaster, the catastrophe, of which Sigurd's passage from birth to death is the compensation and adjustment is set forth, and without it, it seems to me, the epic unity of the poem would not have been intensified, but made impossible.

There is, however, a difficulty of another kind in this opening book. The quality of all others in the *Völsunga Saga* that fits it for the highest poetry is its elemental humanity, and it was this that stirred Morris most deeply and inspired his most memorable work, here as elsewhere. The Sigmund Story of the Saga, however, is as much savage as human, and savage not with the primal fierceness of man but with the terrible and implacable caprice of a malign, or at least

inhuman Fate. Here, as later in the poem, that Fate is embodied in the figure of Odin, but there is a profound difference. When Sigurd has slain Fafnir and found Brynhild on Hindfell, the humanity of the story reacts perfectly clearly upon the Fate that overshadows all. The Fate loses none of its power, but it is humanized, mellowed, and as it were made tolerable by taking into itself something of the human spirit of love. In the Sigmund book there is none of this, and, indeed, the same is to be said of the second book called Regin. Until Sigurd himself begins to control the story, the characters are in constant peril of being swung out of their courses by some fierce stroke of the gods, meaningless and wholly unrelated to anything in themselves. It is a supportable argument to advance that this happens in life, but the answer is that it should not happen in great art. Morris's difficulty was, of course, that he was loth to interfere with the story as it came to him in the Saga, but I cannot help feeling that he here allowed his loyalty in some measure to betray his artistic instinct. It was just one of those supreme difficulties that face only the men who are attempting supreme ends. *Sigurd The Volsung* as it stands ranks with the masterpieces of which the countless millions of men have but created a score or so between them.

The Sigmund book was essential to his epic; had Morris been able to retain the terror of the Saga and yet invest it more fully with the primal impulse of humanity, it is not easy to point to any product of man that would have been clearly entitled to rank above this poem.

In speaking of a thing for which we have the deepest reverence, we would be very clear. The books of Sigmund and Regin, as Morris has given them to us, remain the poetry of a great poet. Whole passages rise to a height as to which there can be no question. The first lines of the poem are enough to satisfy any intelligence that knows what epic poetry is that here we are to be in the presence of fine issues finely wrought--

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors:
Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors.
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.
There dwelt men merry-hearted, and in hope exceeding great
Met the good days and the evil as they went the way of fate.

There the gods were unforgotten, yea whiles they walked with men,
Though e'en in that world's beginning rose a murmur now and again
Of the midward time and the fading and the last of the latter days,
And the entering in of the terror, and the death of the People's Praise:

and the greatness of the poem is manifested long before the finding of Brynhild. But up to that point there is lacking in the spirit of the work as a whole that sense of the inevitable and logical cause and effect in the weaving of human destiny that gives so marvellous a strength to the books called Brynhild and Gudrun.

The plan of the poem seems to me, then, to be perfectly wrought, and the treatment of one part of it not so instinctively right as that of the rest, which is beyond all criticism. As to the actual workmanship apart from the design, the general examination of Morris's methods which has already been made in an earlier chapter covers its main characteristics. But there are qualities here which were not found in *Jason* or *The Earthly Paradise*. There was in those poems an extraordinary ease and at the same time an indication of a titanic strength in reserve. In *Sigurd* this reserve is used, but all the ease is, by some superb paradox of artistic power, retained. The hewn rocks and the cloud-

wrack of Iceland, the great thews of Sigurd and the might of his god-given sword, the proud beauty of the deep-bosomed women who are the mates and mothers of fierce and terrible kings, all these things are sung with a vigour as tremendous as is their own, and yet there is not a strained moment or an uncontrolled turn of expression from beginning to end. And, save in places where the substance of the story itself momentarily excludes it, there is always beauty in the strength. Again we have but to read a page or two into the poem to find an example. Sensuous beauty and fiery strength could not well be more perfectly blended than in this description of the Volsung throne under the Branstock :—

So there was the throne of Volsung beneath its blossoming bower,
But high o'er the roof-crest red it rose 'twixt tower and tower ;
And therein were the wild hawks dwelling, abiding the dole of their lord,
And they wailed high over the wine, and laughed to the waking sword.

And again, when Sigurd is singing in the Niblung hall :—

But his song and his fond desire go up to the cloudy roof,
And blend with the eagles' shrilling in the windy night aloof.

It is at the end of the book of Regin that Sigurd finds Brynhild asleep

> on the tower-top of the world,
> High over the cloud-wrought castle whence the windy bolts are hurled;

and from the moment he awakens her new light and life break into the narrative. Not only in their troth-plighting is a new note of human passion struck, but the Volsung spirit in Sigurd undergoes a change and takes on a larger charity and a more beneficent purpose.

> So the day grew old about them and the joy of their desire,
> And eve and the sunset came, and faint grew the sunset fire,
> And the shadowless death of the day, was sweet in the golden tide;
> But the stars shone forth on the world and the twilight changed and died;
> And sure if the first of man-folk had been born to that starry night,
> And had heard no tale of the sunrise, he had never longed for the light:
> But Earth longed amidst her slumber, as 'neath the night she lay,
> And fresh and all abundant abode the deeds of Day.

And these abundant deeds of day are deeds of peace and healing. Sigurd among Hemir and his 'Lymdale forest lords' brings the dawn of a new age, when

The axe-age and the sword-age seem dead a while ago,
And the age of the cleaving of shields, of brother by brother slain,
And the bitter days of the whoredom, and the hardened lust of gain;
But man to man may hearken, and he that soweth reaps,
And hushed is the heart of Feurir in the wolf-den of the deeps . . .

and again, when he rides to the Niblungs it is with peace and comfortable words upon his lips—

For peace I bear unto thee, and to all the kings of earth
Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;
But unpeace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death;
And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:
And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,
And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap.
Now wide in the world I fare, to seek the dwellings of kings,
For with them would I do and undo, and be heart of their warfarings;
So I thank thee, lord, for thy bidding, and here in thy house will I bide,
And learn of thy ancient wisdom till forth to the field we ride.

It is in this mellowing of the fierce Volsung strain that the redemption of the cosmic spirit of the epic is found. To show this is a purpose not less noble than that of Milton when he

robed himself to justify the ways of God to man, and it is one which must be clearly understood before we can hope to grasp the imaginative impulse that runs as a central thread through all the coloured jewels of Morris's masterpiece. This new chastening of the humanity in Sigurd not only makes the life among which he moves sweeter, but it reacts upon the most tragic judgments of the gods. Nothing could be finer than the way in which we are shown the ennobling influence that it has upon so terrible an event as the betrayal of Sigurd by the Niblung Gunnar and his brothers. It is an act of the blackest treachery, a violation of sacred vows sworn under the roof-tree of their home, an act which in the world of Sigmund would have been merely horrible. But here it is transfigured by the elemental humanity working along the logical ways of cause and effect in the heart of Sigurd and from him into the action of his betrayers, into pure tragedy. Before this quickening, enmity between man and man was a sullen and savage thing, some blinding of their eyes by the hands of mocking gods, but now it springs from the clear conflict of essential emotions and it has in it a new element of pity. Gunnar knows that the ravelled web can be straightened only in this way, but there is no loveless exultation in his mood, and in after days he cherishes the

great memory of the man whom he has slain. And Sigurd knows of the coming end, but there is no hatred in him—

the heart of Hogin he sees,
And the heart of his brother Gunnar, *and he grieveth sore for these.*

In detail Morris discovers a wealth of inventiveness that appears to be inexhaustible. He never allows his beauty of expression to be isolated in such a way as to interfere with the swiftness of narration, but there are many more instances of separable splendours in *Sigurd* than in any other of his poems. When Sigurd tells King Elf, his stepfather, that he would go out into the world, the King answers—

Forsooth no more may we hold thee than the hazel copse may hold
The sun of the early dawning, that turneth it all into gold.

And how exquisite is this of Gudrun's beauty—

And her face is a rose of the morning by the night-tide framed about.

and how perfect in imagination this of the Volsung King's sword—

Therewith from the belt of battle he raised the golden sheath,
And showed the peace-strings glittering around the hidden death.

and there is surely no more lovely description in poetry than this—

So the hall dusk deepens upon them till the candles come arow,
And they drink the wine of departing and gird themselves to go;
And they dight the dark-blue raiment and climb to the wains aloft
While the horned moon hangs in the heaven and the summer wind blows soft.
Then the yoke-beasts strained at the collar, and the dust in the moon arose,
And they brushed the side of the acre and the blooming dewy close;
Till at last, when the moon was sinking and the night was waxen late,
The warders of the earl-folk looked forth from the Niblung gate
And saw the gold pale-gleaming, and heard the wain-wheels crush
The weary dust of the summer amidst the midnight hush.

In *Sigurd*, too, Morris's power of investing his language with the utmost dramatic compression at exactly the right moment is developed to its highest point. One example may be given. Regin means to use Sigurd for his own ends—to make him secure the treasure of Fafnir. But Sigurd as yet has no will for action—

the wary foot is surest, and the hasty oft turns back.

Then the craft of Regin is concentrated into six lines—

The deed is ready to hand,
Yet holding my peace is the best, for well thou lovest the land:
And thou lovest thy life moreover, and the peace of thy youthful days,
And why should the full-fed feaster his hand to the rye-bread raise?
Yet they say that Sigmund begat thee and he looked to fashion a man.
Fear nought; he lieth quiet in his mound by the sea-waves wan.

and Sigurd cries back—

Tell me, thou Master of Masters, what deed is the deed I shall do?
Nor mock thou the son of Sigmund lest the day of his birth thou rue.

In the treatment of the poem throughout, however, the quality that is predominant may be most fittingly described as magnificence of imagination. This is, of course, a thing quite distinct from mere magnificence of phrase. Not only is the utterance splendid, but the thing uttered and the thing suggested are splendid too. The voices are indeed tremendous, but that is because they are the voices of tremendous people. We feel always that we are moving among a humanity not in any way idealized, but framed in the proportions of giants, purged of everything inessential and tautened in all its sinews. And when the

spirits of these people are drawn up to some unwonted height of emotional intensity the result is a cry from a world the knowledge of which moves us to a heroic hope for our race. The grief of Gudrun over Sigurd dead, with the wonderful refrain interwoven by the narrator, is a grief that in itself is a triumph over any blows that destiny can inflict. Once man can sorrow in this fashion, we feel he has conquered his fate. And the death-song of Gunnar is yet more magnificent. The poet who wrote that wonderful chant of man in the face of death has fathomed the very depths of song-craft. Readers who know Morris's poetry will forgive me for taking them through these lines once again—

So perished the Gap of the Gaping, and the cold sea swayed and sang,
And the wind came down on the waters, and the beaten rock-walls rang;
There the Sun from the south came shining, and the Starry Host stood round,
And the wandering Moon of the heavens his habitation found;
And they knew not why they were gathered, nor the deeds of their shaping they knew:
But lo, Mid-Earth the Noble 'neath their might and their glory grew,
And the grass spread over its face, and the Night and the Day were born,
And it cried on the Death in the even, and it cried on the Life in the morn;

Yet it waxed and waxed, and knew not, and it lived and had not learned;
And where were the Framers that framed, and the Soul and the Might that had yearned?

On the Thrones are the Powers that fashioned, and they name the Night and the Day,
And the tide of the Moon's increasing, and the tide of his waning away;
And they name the years for the story; and the Lands they change and change,
The great and the mean and the little, that this unto that may be strange:
They met, and they fashioned dwellings, and the House of Glory they built;
They met, and they fashioned the Dwarf-kind, and the Gold and the Gifts and the Guilt.

There were twain, and they went upon earth, and were speechless unmighty and wan;
They were hopeless, deathless, lifeless, and the Mighty named them Man;
Then they gave them speech and power, and they gave them colour and breath;
And deeds and the hope they gave them, and they gave them Life and Death;
Yea, hope, as the hope of the Framers; yea, might, as the Fashioners had,
Till they wrought, and rejoiced in their bodies, and saw their sons and were glad:
And they changed their lives and departed, and came back as the leaves of the trees
Come back and increase in the summer:—and I, I, I am of these;
And I know of Them that have fashioned, and the deeds that have blossomed and grow;
But nought of the God's repentance, or the God's undoing I know.

No more striking example of the meaning of personality in poetry could well be found than in a comparison between this song and the famous second chorus of Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon," which had been published ten years earlier. Superficially there is a kinship both of substance and music, but superficially only. A moderately sensitive ear will immediately catch the difference in the swell of the lines, and the substance is alike just as a landscape of Turner is like one of Corot's—they are both landscapes.

The imaginative and moral atmosphere of *Sigurd* is that of the northern peoples. The figures of the story are giants and move along their lives as such, but there is always behind them the mute shadow of a yet greater immensity, the fate that reveals itself through no oracles. At the moments of their most glorious victories and sweetest attainment, these men and women, Sigurd and Gunnar and Brynhild and Gudrun and their fellows, are more or less consciously in the presence of the end that makes neither presage nor promise. The hope of Valhall is in reality no more than sublime courage. Morris himself, in a letter written at the time when he was going through the Sagas, said 'what a glorious outcome of the worship of Courage these stories are.' This is, finally,

the supreme gift of the northern race to the world, and it is embodied for us for ever in the song of *Sigurd the Volsung;* not unquestioning acceptance, not the cheerful strength of faith, not mere indifference begotten of the delights of the immediate moment, but a deep sense of the mystery that may or may not be beneficent in its design, and in the face of all an invulnerable Courage.

VI

TRANSLATIONS AND SOCIALISM

The completion of *Sigurd the Volsung* may conveniently be treated as a half-way house in Morris's career. The poet had fully proved himself. The lovely morning song of *Guenevere*, a little uncertain both in its own expression of life and in the direction along which it pointed the singer's development, but nevertheless clearly the promise of some memorable doings in the world of poetry, had matured through the simple clarity and joyousness of *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* into this fierce and elemental strength, corrected as it were from step to step by the practical experience of the poet's daily life. At the beginning of the translation of the *Völsunga Saga* he had written—

> So draw ye round and hearken, English Folk,
> Unto the best tale pity ever wrought—

and now he had fashioned that tale anew into its greatest presentment, raising its spirit into an expression worthy to rank with the supreme masterpieces of the world. His creativeness as

poet had not exhausted itself, but it had achieved its most urgent purpose; it had evolved a life which the poet's imaginative longing told him might yet be realized on earth. From this time the business of setting the crooked straight among the affairs of his day began to absorb his attention and energy, and in the outcome he published but one more book of poems, which will be considered later. In 1875 he had printed his verse translation of *The Aeneids of Virgil*, about which, as was inevitable, the opinion of classical scholars was, and remains, divided. There is a quality in poetry which is finally untranslatable from one language to another, the quality that is knit into the words themselves. The ecstasy of which I have spoken is capable of a thousand shades of spiritual colour, and when a poet is moved by it he is moved by it in a kind that can never be precisely repeated, either in himself or another. The translator as a rule gives us the substance and loses this other quality altogether; the most that we can hope for is that he may be a poet himself, and, retaining the substance, substitute an ecstasy of his own which shall in some measure compensate for the loss of the particular exaltation of the original. This Morris does; reading his translation we may—indeed must—miss some essential Virgilian quality, but we have the great story

faithfully told, and we have poetry. We may continue to ask for more than that, but we shall continue to be denied. This translation was followed by *The Odyssey* in 1887 and *Beowulf* in 1895.

The growth of Morris's socialism can fortunately be traced without divergence into chronological data. Of its nature we have already seen something in considering his poetry, but in *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* he defined it in detail, not only in its imaginative but also in its practical aspect. Before turning to these it will be well briefly to outline his movements in the later years of his life. The business of Morris and Company had already passed into his own hands, not without some difficulty—though without friction—in closing the partnership arrangements. This really meant but little added labour, as he had in effect been responsible for its control almost since its commencement. In 1877 he was asked whether he would accept the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford in the event of its being offered to him, and declined emphatically though graciously enough. In the next year he moved to the house on the Mall at Hammersmith to which was attached the lecture room where the early meetings of the Hammersmith Socialists were held, and his active propagandist work had

begun. In addition to constant meetings and lectures on socialism and art, the conduct of his paper *The Commonweal*, and his own business affairs, he undertook any work that came to his hand for the furtherance of his fixed ideal. Among other things he was one of the founders and the first secretary of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, and finally he linked to his name the brief but noble career of the Kelmscott Press. He died on the 3rd of October, 1896, at the age of sixty-three, and was buried in the churchyard at Kelmscott, wearied out but not embittered by the strife of his later years and the insults of people who could only feel the vigour of his blows without understanding the cause in which they were struck.

A Dream of John Ball was published in 1888. In it Morris gives once again a picture of that life lived in close contact with earth which he so earnestly desired, but it is not the complete life of *The Earthly Paradise* or *News from Nowhere*. The people are not yet free, although they have not yet fallen to the indifference to freedom that Morris looked upon as the most distressing manifestation of his own day. Together with this picture we have a long discussion between John Ball, the people's priest, and the dreamer—Morris himself—as to the result of the risings that are then taking shape,

and the future of civilization. The hope that the priest cries out to the people from the village cross becomes in turn the hope of Morris for his own generation, and slowly, in the talk that follows, the dreamer outlines the whole cause and effect of the evil that is analysed much more closely in *News from Nowhere;* the age of commercial tyranny that shall come will be strong in its days because the slaves will nurse the hope that they themselves may rise to the seats of the tyrants in turn—'and this shall be the very safeguard of all rule and law in those days.' John Ball speaks with the voice of Morris. When he was in prison he—

> 'lay there a-longing for the green fields and the white-thorn bushes and the lark singing over the corn, and the talk of good fellows round the ale-house bench, and the babble of the little children, and the team on the road and the beasts afield, and all the life of earth.'

The book need not be considered in detail in connection with Morris's socialism, for it is but a suggestion, whilst *News from Nowhere* is an elaborate statement. But it contains certain words that were very close to Morris's heart. The recognition, for example, that humanity cannot reach the simplicity that he conceived to be its finest end without much thought and careful fostering, or in other words that this

simplicity was not the product of barbarism but of a highly perfected state of evolution, finds expression in the frank acceptance by this clear-headed and high-hearted priest of the value of his companion's scholarship. In this book, as always, Morris kept his work definitely in the region of imaginative art. Not only is the descriptive writing vivid and full of beauty, but he retains throughout the full power of literary illusion. This is very strikingly shown in the pages where the priest questions the dreamer as to what will be the end of that distant day of oppression of which they are speaking. Will a new and clear day break on us? As we read through to the answer we become deeply concerned as to what it will be, as though we were listening indeed to one speaking with authority; and when we find that it is one of hopefulness and courage we feel strangely and splendidly reassured. We know again that the finest persuasiveness is that of art.

News from Nowhere appeared in America in 1890 and in England in 1891. It has been, perhaps, the most popular of all Morris's writings, but curiously under-estimated by his critics both as a practical enunciation of his social creed and as an embodiment of his social vision. The scheme of the book is very simple. The narrator—Morris again, of course—goes to bed one

winter night at his Hammersmith house. He wakes to a fresh June morning in an altered world. The life of this world, the new communism somewhere in the twenty-second century, he describes at length, and weaves into it a long conversation with one of its old men which traces the course by which it has grown from the nineteenth century and defines the errors which it has cancelled. The constitution of this life may be assailable at certain points, and some of the steps by which it has been reached —the armed revolution for instance—may be arbitrary in conception, but these things are of no moment. The important fact is that Morris's indictment of our contemporary social system is perfectly logical at every point, and that the new life that he creates is complete in its humanity and not that of a misty world of dreams. Of its prophetic value it is impossible to speak; as to that we can decide in our imagination alone. But to suggest that the book is not consistently conscious of the true nature of our social defects on its negative side, and on its positive side fiercely alive to the real meaning of life, is merely to misunderstand it and its subject. Some examination on both these sides is necessary in support of this statement, and its negative or destructive teaching is to be considered first.

Men should have joy in the work of their hands, and they had none. That, in Morris's view, was the fundamental evil to be cured, and he seeks at the outset to discover its cause. Says Hammond, who acts as spokesman for the new people—

> 'Go and have a look at the sheep-walks high up the slopes between Ingleborough and Pen-y-gwent and tell me if you think we *waste* the land there by not covering it with factories for making things that nobody wants, which was the chief business of the nineteenth century!'

This state was the product, he continues, of 'a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World-Market; and that World-Market, once set a-going, forced them to go on making more and more of these wares, whether they needed them or not.' The result was, of course, that the system became master of the work, and the work itself ceased to have any significance, and 'under this horrible burden of unnecessary production it became impossible for them to look upon labour and its results from any other point of view than one—to wit, the ceaseless endeavour to expend the least possible amount of labour on any made, and yet at the same time to make as many articles as possible.' Anybody who has had the smallest experience of commerce knows that this is pre-

cisely the vicious circle into which we have been caught. And with this Morris sets out clearly the fact that the support of this state is to the interest solely of the men who have the power to control labour and not that of the labour itself, but that the workers have on the one hand, as he says in the passage quoted from *A Dream of John Ball*, a hope that they too may become masters and tyrannize in turn, and, on the other hand, the long habit of drawing wages from these controllers has imbued them with a dull belief that they are in reality dependent not on their own work but upon some indefinable source of wealth set up above them. Then, again, this system of class privilege has behind it the power of a government that, though mainly ineffective in itself, yet controls a further system of right by might—the Law Courts and police and military, all of which things, with a fine show of judicial balance, can be and are employed not to develop society but to uphold establishments, the chief of which is this very privilege and inequality. So that by an elaborate structure of oppression which is necessary to the maintenance of the position of the few, the people are quite effectually prevented from bringing any spiritual discipline into their work, and are so deprived of the most abiding happiness that life has to offer. That briefly is the central significance of Morris's

social proposition. The practical means of deliverance is a matter upon which no two people are likely to agree, and the method suggested by Morris need not be discussed, because it does not really affect the general question. But it cannot well be denied that his view of the evil is a sound one, and that deliverance in one way or another is a possibility by which alone contemplation of the evil is made tolerable.

The constructive aspect of the book not only shows the life for which Morris hoped, but answers many of the objections made by reaction to socialism in any shape. 'I have been told,' says the stranger, 'that political strife was a necessary result of human nature.'

> 'Human nature!' cried the old boy impetuously; 'what human nature?' The human nature of paupers, of slaves, of slave-holders, or the human nature of wealthy freemen? Which? Come, tell me that!

And then again—

> 'Now, this is what I want to ask you about, to wit, how you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how you get them to work strenuously?'
>
> 'No reward of labour?' said Hammond, gravely, 'the reward of labour is *life*. Is that not enough?'
>
> 'But no reward for especially good work,' quoth I.
>
> 'Plenty of reward,' said he, 'the reward of creation. The wages which God gets, as people might

have said time agone. If you are going to ask to be paid for the pleasure of creation, which is what excellence in work means, the next thing we shall hear of will be a bill sent in for the begetting of children.'

'Well, but,' said I, 'the man of the nineteenth century would say there is a natural desire toward the procreation of children, and a natural desire not to work.'

'Yes, yes,' said he, 'I know the ancient platitude; wholly untrue; indeed, to us quite meaningless.'

That is very simple, and yet it shows the profoundest insight into the essential nature of humanity. Nothing is sadder or more ludicrous than to hear people say that they turn to the degraded sensationalism that passes for life in daily report because of their interest in human nature. The enervating influence of this perversion of life upon much of our finest artistic genius has been mentioned. Morris was not much given to criticizing contemporary literature in his writing, but he makes one of the people in his new world say of certain books of the late nineteenth century—

'But I say flatly that in spite of all their cleverness and vigour, and capacity for story telling, there is something loathsome about them. Some of them, indeed, do here and there show some feeling for those whom the history-books call 'poor,' and of the misery of whose lives we have some inkling; but presently they give it up, and towards the end of the story we

> must be contented to see the hero and heroine living in an island of bliss on other people's troubles; and that after a long series of sham troubles (or mostly sham) of their own making, illustrated by dreary introspective nonsense about their feelings and aspirations, and all the rest of it.'

That was written before the new day of John Galsworthy and John Masefield, and even then Morris would have been the first to make many honourable exclusions from his charge. But the charge itself was founded on deep understanding.

In the life to which the revolt against this sham life has led in *News from Nowhere* the radical change is, of course, that all this misuse of work has been abolished. People no longer make unnecessary things and so find time to make the necessary things well. And the very act of doing this has brought a strange new exultation into their lives, and once again human nature has come into its own unbridled expression. They still have their troubles, their love-quarrels, 'the folly which comes by nature, the unwisdom of the immature man, or the older men caught in a trap,' the anxiety of the mother as to her children—'they may indeed turn out better or worse; they may disappoint her highest hopes; such anxieties as these are a part of the mingled pleasure and pain which goes

to make up the life of mankind,'—but they are free of the cares of a time when the aim of men's work was to come uppermost in competition and not to make the work its own joy and reward. The men and women still have their difficult sex problems to solve, but they do not complicate them by wilful neglect of obvious facts ; they recognize for instance that a man or a woman may love quite genuinely and tire and even love again as at first, and if a match does not turn out well, they break it and shake off the grief 'in a way which perhaps the sentimentalists of other times would think contemptible and unheroic, but which we think necessary and manlike.' Their acceptance of these natural facts does not mean that they live in a state of disorganized and capricious relationship. Faithful love is a common enough condition among them, but they are not unwise enough to suppose that when it is not present its place can be satisfactorily and wholesomely taken by an artificial pretence. Finding this joy in the work of their hands, and seeing no end to work other than that joy, they have lost all jealousy of the work of their fellows, and every man is encouraged to the best that is in him by common consent and approval. Infinite variety has taken the place of monotony, and one man's pleasure in another's achievement the place of

fear that it may mean loss to himself. Hammond can say—

> We live amidst beauty without fear of becoming effeminate, . . . we have plenty to do, and on the whole enjoy doing it. What more can we ask of life?

What indeed? It must be remembered that he says 'we.' The delight is complete only because it is common to all.

> 'In time past, indeed, men were told to love their kind, to believe in the religion of humanity and so forth. But look you, just in the degree that a man had elevation of mind and refinement enough to be able to value this idea was he repelled by the obvious aspect of the individuals composing the mass which he was to worship; and he could only evade that repulsion by making a conventional abstraction of mankind that had little actual or historical relation to the race, which to his eyes was divided into blind tyrants on the one hand and apathetic degraded slaves on the other. But now, where is the difficulty in accepting the religion of humanity, when the men and women who go to make up humanity are free, happy, and energetic at least, and most commonly beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning, and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind?'

That was Morris's clear conviction as to the whole question, and the word that he uses to describe the new meaning of work—that is the remedy of all the social evils against which he was in revolt—is art.

This, then, was the creed and the hope that Morris set out in detail in *News from Nowhere*. That the dream was farther from realization than he thought may be the unhappy truth, but of this at least we are sure, that he dreamt a good thing. The picture that he shows us is of healthy, aspiring, joyous men and women, full of sweet humour and clean passion, who, far from having lost all incentive to endeavour, have found a new and tremendous cause for endeavour in every hour of the day. For them work and worship have become one, and of the union has come life. The prose that Morris uses is beautiful because perfectly adapted to its purpose. In the practical discussions on particular questions the style is swift and incisive; in the descriptions of the life of his new world it is coloured by all his tenderness and love for men and natural beauty. 'The earth and the growth and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!' It is a cry always ready upon his lips. And he brings to his work here, too, a charming and whimsical humour. The little sketch of that wonderful person the Golden Dustman is a master-stroke of genuinely human comedy. And the humour may be leavened with admirable satire; he has in his mind a certain day in Trafalgar Square, when 'unarmed and peaceable people were attacked by ruffians armed with

bludgeons.' 'And they put up with that?' says Dick—

> 'We *had* to put up with it; we couldn't help it.'
>
> The old man looked at me keenly and said: 'You seem to know a great deal about it, neighbour! And is it really true that nothing came of it?'
>
> 'This came of it,' said I, 'that a good many people were sent to prison because of it.'
>
> 'What, of the bludgeoners?' said the old man. 'Poor devils!'
>
> 'No, no,' said I, 'of the bludgeoned.'
>
> Said the old man rather severely: 'Friend, I expect that you have been reading some rotten collection of lies, and have been taken in by it too easily.'

The book has been described, quite aptly, as insular. In its atmosphere and colour it is essentially English. The accounts of a reconstructed London and a cleansed countryside, of the great Thames reaches and the stone buildings of the Cotswolds, of the happy and generous but rather silent folk, of their traditions and customs and their characteristics, are all written by an Englishman of Englishmen and their country. Their natures have not been fundamentally changed, but stripped of the excrescences of an effete and degraded society, and they are still drawn in their proper relation to their native landscape. They are the clearly wrought ideal of our race, but they have left in them nothing of those products of our race

who consistently confuse expediency with ethical fitness, sentimentalism with passion, and celebrate the planting of the British flag in all sorts of places where it is not in the least wanted by calling themselves God's Englishmen.

VII

PROSE ROMANCES AND POEMS BY THE WAY

During the later years of his life, when he was distracted by the many claims of his active socialism and constantly harassed by details of organization and the efforts to reconcile people who, having the same interests, persisted in misunderstanding each other, Morris wrote a series of prose romances that hold a distinctive place in his art. His long poems show us a life conceived on lines that I have sought to trace, approached in a mood of austere responsibility and defined with all the completeness that he could bring to work. In these prose romances the life is unchanged, but it is seen through a different mood. It is as though he turned aside from the stress of his daily work to the world that his imagination had already created as the only sane one for men, and saw it with a kind of new leisureliness and wholesome irresponsibility. It was impossible for him to allow fancy to intrude upon the life that

he desired to the exclusion of any of its vital qualities, but, as far as was possible without such offence to his artistic conscience, in these romances he indulged his faculty for story-telling without curb. The people and their adventures and characters are still, as in the poems, related continuously to Morris's radical conception of life, but they are no longer related to any central purpose contained in the work of art itself. The waywardness and profuseness of romanticism are here carried to their extreme limits, and yet we never feel that the narratives are formless, so powerful and fixed is the vision through which Morris draws them into unity. The justification of his indifference to the ordinary demands of construction in a book like *The Roots of the Mountains*, is that we do not feel that the work would gain in any way were he scrupulously careful in this matter. Morris had created a world in his imagination, just and beautiful as it seemed to him. From that world he drew the substance of his great poems, reducing it to the essential and symbolic terms of art. *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* and *Sigurd* are all perfectly constructed results of the submission of this world to the severe process of artistic selection. But in the later prose romances we are led into the very world itself from which these things were drawn, and given

leave to wander through it as we will. We find that it is cosmic as life is cosmic, but it is not yet wrought into the stricter proportions of art. If we can think of Morris writing through another generation, it is impossible to believe that he would have turned again, say, to the Volsung story; that he had shaped finally in *Sigurd the Volsung;* but we feel that he might have found material in these romances for poem after poem, that, indeed, they are, as it were, a panoramic expression of the world from which his poems must inevitably be imagined. There is in them nothing of inconsistency, but there is a prodigal diffuseness that belongs rather to nature than to art. They are the storehouse from which Morris's own art was drawn, and poets to come may yet turn to them as they do to Malory or as Morris himself did to the Sagas.

The choice of prose for these romances was, for this reason, not in any way arbitrary but the result of sound artistic deliberation. Where Morris used the same material and crystallized it through his finest imaginative impulse, verse was the natural and inevitable medium; but he is here showing us the material before it had been subjected to this highest creative energy, and there is not the spiritual fusion that makes verse necessary to complete expression. The

prose that he uses is stamped always with his personality, and so justifies itself even where most open to criticism. It is commonly of extraordinary beauty, full of the gravity and high manners that belong to the heroic atmosphere of the stories themselves ; and even where the adaptation of an archaic method of speech is most pronounced it is not self-conscious. All language is dependent largely on convention, and that Morris used a convention that was not generally accepted was a virtue in workmanship rather than a vice. The important thing is that he was consistent in the use, or, in other words, that his convention was never a mannerism but definitely a corporate part of his style.

These stories are but another instance of the remarkable range of Morris's artistic power. They do not, of course, rank with his own most splendid work, but in a particular kind of prose romance they attain an excellence that had not been known in England for several centuries. And in the ease with which they hold our interest in the story and at the same time maintain a perfect consistency of character, they show that, had he chosen, Morris might have added yet another to his many achievements, and challenged comparison with the best of Fielding's successors. The Bride and the Sun-

beam, Face-of-God and Walter and Folk-Might, and, above all, Dallach, are drawn with that certainty and depth of understanding of the individual that are perhaps the chief distinction of the youngest of the literary arts in England.

In 1891 Morris's last book of poems, *Poems By The Way*, was published by the Kelmscott Press. In it the poet gathered together some fifty of his shorter poems written at intervals during the thirty years since the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere*, and there are naturally in the volume a wide range of subjects and much diversity of manner. Fragments from rejected or unfinished tales intended for *The Earthly Paradise*, fine echoes and memories of his Icelandic studies and travel, lyrical expressions of this mood or that, translations from the Flemish and Danish and his beloved saga-tongue, fairy tales, chants that grew out of his socialism, and a few poems that show that when he chose to apply his poetic vision to modern conditions he could do so with profound penetration, are brought together almost at haphazard. If, as Mr. Arthur Symons says, a pageant is a shining disorder, then this book is truly a pageant. And yet behind all these expressions of many times and moods is to be seen the central impulse of Morris's life knitting

them together into a clear spiritual unity. It seems a far cry from the delicate tenderness of 'From the Upland to the Sea' to the passion of 'Mother and Son,' from the sombre brooding of 'To the Muse of the North' to the airy romance of 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks,' yet they are all unmistakably begotten of the same temperament. The high reverence for naked life, the insistence on labour being joyful if it was not to be abominable, the fierce worship of beauty and the courageous acceptance of its passing, these were the things by which Morris had his being, and they are woven into all the pages of his last book. He was a man who took literally no thought as to the relation of the work in hand to that of years passed. A story is told of him that when a friend who was helping him to collect the material for *Poems By The Way* brought a poem to him he could not remember having written a line of it. The perfect consistency of his aim and temper from first to last is the more remarkable in consequence, and the kinship between two fragmentary expressions of his life, divided perhaps by thirty years, is fine to see. His understanding of the ideal towards which he strove became clearer as he passed through his strenuous existence, and his powers of realizing it in his art matured steadily to the end, but the ideal itself

was unchanged. That in an artist is a splendid thing: a thing that perhaps of all others is the token of his divinity. For it is that central certainty of purpose that is immortal in him, austerely set above the change of circumstance. The form of his art may pass from its first imitative and awkward groping slowly to its perfection or it may prove itself at the beginning, but it is the great guiding purpose that he cannot gain by seeking, and that lends truth to the common phrase.

Of certain of the poems no more than a word need be said, whilst others need to be considered more fully. The northern poems, such as 'Gunnar's Howe' and 'Of the Wooing of Hallbiorn' and those belonging to the *Earthly Paradise* period are beautiful strays from phases of the poet's work that have already been discussed. Here and there we find a deliberate return to an earlier manner, as in 'The Hall and the Wood,' written in 1890, where many of the devices used in the *Guenevere* volume are again employed and with even greater success. Here, for example, is a beautiful reminiscence of lines already quoted—

> She stood before him face to face,
> With the sun-beam thwart her hand,
> As on the gold of the Holy Place
> The painted angels stand.

With many a kiss she closed his eyes;
She kissed him cheek and chin:
E'en so in the painted Paradise
Are Earth's folk welcomed in.

The short lyrics, 'Love's Gleaning Tide,' 'Spring's Bedfellow,' 'Pain and Time Strive Not,' and two or three others, have just that intangible beauty that makes lyrical poetry at once unforgettable and impossible to discuss in any detail. In one of them, 'The Garden by the Sea,' which is the lovely song from the Hylas episode in *Jason*, Morris altered three lines, not, I think, for the better. The fairy poem 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks' is play, but the play of a great poet. Then we have the charming verses written for tapestries and pictures, slight enough and yet struck by Morris's unerring instinct into sparks of poetry. This of the Vine—

I draw the blood from out the earth;
I store the sun for winter mirth.

and this of the Mulberry Tree—

Love's lack hath dyed my berries red:
For Love's attire my leaves are shed.

are perfect of their kind. There remain two groups, both inspired more or less by the same impulse, but differing a good deal in their artistic value. The first of these consists of poems written directly to embody the prin-

ciples of active socialism that absorbed the greater part of his energy in later life; it includes 'All for the Cause,' 'The Day is Coming,' and 'The Voice of Toil' among others. Here again Morris proved his incapacity to write verse that was not poetry, but he gets nearer to the border-line at times in these poems than he does anywhere else in his work; he is, however, still well on the right side. 'All for the Cause' is a fine direct challenge to the workers to assert their own lives, but the challenge is made to all that is best in their nature, even to the best of that nature that the poet hopes will yet be fostered in them. 'The Day is Coming' has a strong vein of irony in it that looks a little strange in Morris's verse, and yet it is admirably managed—

For then, laugh not, but listen to this strange tale of mine,
All folk that are in England shall be better lodged than swine.

Then a man shall work and bethink him, and rejoice in the deeds of his hand,
Nor yet come home in the even too faint and weary to stand.

Men in that time a-coming shall work and have no fear
For to-morrow's lack of earning and the hunger-wolf anear.

I tell you this for a wonder, that no man shall be glad
Of his fellow's fall and mishap to snatch at the work he had.

For that which the worker winneth shall then be his indeed,
Nor shall half be reaped for nothing by him that sowed no seed.

O strange new wonderful justice! But for whom shall we gather the gain?
For ourselves and for each of our fellows, and no hand shall labour in vain.

Then all Mine and all Thine shall be Ours, and no more shall any man crave
For riches that serve for nothing but to fetter a friend for a slave.

The tremendous sincerity that induced an artist so sensitive to the proper uses of his art to press it into the service of a cause to which he had linked his life is in itself a justification of the result. The higher qualities of his imagination may be momentarily set aside, but the thing is nevertheless afire; it burns with conviction. The optimism that disgusts us is the optimism that is not in direct relation to effort. The sacrifices that Morris was making to his socialism in the practical conduct of his life were reflected quite clearly in the spirit of these poems and quickened it. It is said that this poetry was written for the occasion, but it must be remembered that the occasion was one knit into the very fibre of the poet's being. A curious poem which belongs to this group is 'The God of the Poor,' the first draft of which was written about 1870 or earlier. A simple story of allegorical cast, telling of the overcoming of the oppressor of the people, Maltete, by their deliverer Boncœur, it is interesting as

showing a definite attitude in the poet's mind towards these problems years before he sought actively to deal with them.

In the second of the groups of which I speak are six or seven poems that deal with some particular rather than general aspect of life. 'Hope Dieth: Love Liveth' and 'Error and Loss' touch remote, though essential, aspects of the psychology of love, if I may use the phrase, with a subtlety that was one of Browning's peculiar distinctions. The endurance of love when everything, even hope, is lost, and the pathos of the defeat of love's end by mere chance, have never been handled with greater poignancy and insight. 'Of The Three Seekers' lacks this depth of vision, and states rather than convinces, though there is that habitual simplicity of Morris in the statement that gives it its own value. In 'Drawing Near the Light' we have lyrical expression of a universal mood drawn into contact with a particular state. It may be quoted in full—

> Lo, when we wade the tangled wood,
> In haste and hurry to be there,
> Nought seem its leaves and blossoms good,
> For all that they be fashioned fair.
>
> But looking up, at last we see
> The glimmer of the open light,
> From o'er the place where we would be:
> Then grow the very brambles bright.

So now, amidst our day of strife,
With many a matter glad we play,
When once we see the light of life
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.

There is here a suggestion of the application of Morris's whole poetic vision to the concrete affairs of his socialism that found its supreme achievement in the three magnificent poems, 'The Message of the March Wind,' 'Mother and Son' and 'The Half of Life Gone.' In these poems the contemplation of life amid the conflicting currents that spring from a particular phase in the evolution of civilization rather than from the fundamental sources of humanity is lifted into the highest regions of poetry. They stand apart from, though not above, the rest of Morris's work, and are indirectly an emphatic vindication of his general method. What that method was we have examined already, but in these poems he gave final proof that if he chose to bring his art into superficial and obvious relation with the localized conditions of his time he could do so as admirably as any man. That with the consciousness of this power in himself he deliberately chose the other method in the great mass of his work is the reply to his critics who suggest that he turned away from his own time in his art because he was not stirred to any real imaginative understanding of it.

'The Message of the March Wind' is the complete expression of the central tenet of his socialistic creed. The poet—or the speaker—is keenly responsive to the things that Morris held to be alone of worth in life. He is among the green beauty of earth in the springtide; the woman he loves with him. They have wandered

> From township to township, o'er down and by village,

and now they stand in the twilight, looking down the white road before them, where

> The straw from the ox-yard is blowing about;
> The moon's rim is rising, a star glitters o'er us,
> And the vane on the spire-top is swinging in doubt.

They are in the full content of their love and the sweetness of the earth, and then—

> Hark, the wind in the elm-boughs! from London it bloweth,
> And telleth of gold, of hope and unrest:
> Of power that helps not; of wisdom that knoweth,
> But teacheth not aught of the worst and the best.

The contrast is thus imagined, and leads the poet into a direct statement of his understanding of the whole problem. He never flattered the people for whom he was working into the belief that the great unleavened majority had the wisdom of the world on its side. His rejection of that idea was as emphatic as Ibsen's. What he sought was to make them realize the fact themselves. He did not tell them that they were fitted for the great simple joys of life,

but that they had the right to be so fitted, and that it was in themselves alone to assert that right. His aim was to make them discontented with themselves and the ugliness of their own lives, knowing that once this was done the rest would inevitably follow. And he realized, on the other hand, that the life which he worshipped was made impossible and all its virtue destroyed simply by the surroundings that by some obscure process of evil had established themselves on earth. The happiness of the speaker and his lover in this fresh beauty of the spring twilight was the outcome not of any inherent virtue of their own, but of the mere chance of their escape from this disease of circumstance.

> Hark! the March wind again of a people is telling:
> Of the life that they live there, so haggard and grim,
> That if we and our love amidst them had been dwelling
> My fondness had faltered, thy beauty grown dim.

The poem takes up, with exquisite tenderness, the hope that these people over whom the March wind has passed will yet awaken from their sleep of degradation, and turns back again to the quiet peace of the village inn with the 'lights and the fire,'

> And the fiddler's old tune and the shuffling of feet;
> For there in a while shall be rest and desire,
> And there shall the morrow's uprising be sweet.

The whole poem is one more witness to the sovereignty of art. The deepest social difficulty of our time is here drawn through the meshes of the artist's imagination and, purged of everything inessential, set out in vibrating colour and line far more appealing and convincing than all the statistical statements of the lords of rule. The failure of our modern legislation to realize the value of art in any hope of national regeneration is not the least of its blunders. Artists have, happily, escaped from the patronage of courts, but until the propagandists rediscover the fact that they must bring back the artists to their help, not as servants but as fellow labourers, they will not work wisely. The artists continue their labour, building some beauty in the world. That labour can be directed by no one but themselves, but it is at their peril that the workers who are striving, earnestly enough, towards a better hope refuse to throw the creations of the artist into the balance with their own endeavour. To bring poetry to the issue of a definite social problem, is, unfortunately, thought of as mere idleness. But let 'The Message of the March Wind' be delivered to the people up and down the land, as systematically if need be as the demand for rent or taxes, and it will be heard willingly enough, and when it is heard there will be

new life among us. I speak in metaphors, but there may be method even in a metaphor. For 'The Message of the March Wind' might bring people in turn to *The Earthly Paradise*, and then the aim of Morris's art—of all art—would be understood by the world.

'Mother and Son' is wider than 'The Message of the March Wind' in its scope inasmuch as it deals with a subject less peculiar to a particular generation or age, narrower in that it is concerned with one definite event instead of general conditions. A woman is speaking to her love-child. To analyse the poem would be to quote it almost line by line, but the conflict of the very roots of humanity with the blind dictates of circumstance, the tenderness of motherhood and the wistful yearning of a soul crossed in an uncharitable social scheme could scarcely find an expression more purely poetic. And 'The Half of Life Gone' touches this conflict with equal vigour and pity.

Reading these poems we are glad that Morris ordered his art as he did. Beautiful as they are and perfectly as they show the possibility of bringing all things into the purifying influence of the imaginative faculty, they yet leave us with an exultation that has in it some strain of despondency. Through no fault in the poet's working there is somewhere a flaw

in the crystal. We thank him for showing us these things as we had not seen them before, but he has already tutored us too well. We turn back to the life that he has already made necessary to our being in the quiet ways of *The Earthly Paradise* and the great wind-swept world of *Sigurd the Volsung*.

VIII

CONCLUSION

To enquire whether Marlowe was a greater poet than Milton or Milton a greater than Keats is but to juggle with words and to spin them into nothingness. It is enough that all were great. It is no honour to the giants of the earth to pit them one against another for our sport. That Morris was or was not the greatest poet of his age or century is a matter of complete unimportance upon which nothing depends. The supremely important thing, the splendid circumstance, is that here again in due season was a man unmistakably moulded in heroic proportions, one claiming and proving kinship with the masters whose names are but few. If humanity was fortunate enough to see others of his peers in his own day we can but be thankful for grace so prodigal; but, however that may be, here at least was one establishing anew the proudest succession of mankind. The creator of *Sigurd the Volsung* and so much more that is compact of sane and wholesome magnificence has his right-

ful company, and it may well be the gladdest boast of the world that he has; but in that company there are no degrees. Æschylus, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Beethoven, Wagner, Shelley, Wordsworth—there is an inspiration to the lips in the very names of these men and their fellows, but there must be no disputation as to the headship in their presence; they themselves will but laugh if they heed us at all. And Morris is, as I see him, clearly of that fellowship. By some strange generosity of nature he was not only allowed to give great poetry to the world, but also to readjust for us the significance of life in phases a little lower than the highest. It happened that a man who had the profoundest sense of the real nature of circumstance and conditions in his generation could enforce his direct and practical teaching by a creative imagination of the highest order. It would, perhaps, be fitter to say that in this man a supreme creative faculty was allied to another faculty that enabled him to interpret his imaginative art to the world in terms of immediate practice. The result of this is that although the indirect influence of his creative art—and that is always the profoundest influence in these things—is neither more nor less definable than that of other men of an equal power, his

direct influence not upon abstract or scientific thought but upon the spiritual perception of men, has perhaps been more instant and far-reaching than that of any man in the history of English genius. It is, indeed, difficult to find anywhere a precise parallel to the curious phenomenon that was Morris. Experience proves the advent of a great poet to be apparently capricious, the unconsidered whim of powers that make but little distinction of seasons. The "Songs of Innocence" were quite definitely sung in the wilderness. But that manifestation of genius which covers a range wider than its own finest creation, and takes on something of universality in pervading itself not only with its own life but with the life of the world, would seem to be reserved for days that mark the culmination of some memorable epoch of imaginative activity, and in itself to be the crowning expression of such days. Michael Angelo and Shakespeare came at times when national life had been running with rare spiritual force for some years; when, that is to say, the world was cherishing beauty and had rich gifts to offer such men when they arose. The great word was but seeking a voice, and it is difficult to dissociate Michael Angelo from the impulse of Renaissance Italy, or Shakespeare from the impulse of Elizabethan England. The mighty

utterance of these men was their own, wrought into its perfection by their separate and distinctive temperaments; of the essential isolation of the artist I have already spoken. But it is nevertheless an utterance in some measure made possible by the currents of the time in which it came and one for which an examination of the immediately preceding years prepares us. These men are exultant figures challenging the world for ever from heights that they did not build unaided. This, of course, does not effect their achievement, and the subordination of many splendid forces to one supreme end is, perhaps, the highest exercise of the faculty of design in the cosmic genius. The coming of such men is not less moving because it seems to be inevitable, but that it does seem inevitable is clear. There are, too, times when men move, as it were, in a kind of receptive stupor, times when great forces are latent in their midst; it is possible for a man of this imaginative universality to arrive at such a time without any apparent preparation in the days before him, and, being at once the pioneer and culmination of a new era, yet not to excite our astonishment as well as our worship, because the time, although lending him no impulse, at least offers him no resistance. The world could not be said to be expecting Goethe or—Collins and Gray notwithstanding—Wordsworth, and

yet we are not surprised when we come to these men, because we have been moving through darkness between light and light, and have been expecting any new and sudden revelation that might be made—expecting to be surprised. Goethe and Wordsworth, unlike Michael Angelo and Shakespeare, did not appear as the final and perfect articulation of a word passed freely from lip to lip by their fellows, but they were at least allowed to speak without any violent denial being implicit in the whole intellectual and spiritual and artistic attitude of their time. Having the revelation of new temperaments to make, they found, inevitably, isolated voices of criticism against them, but, save for these, the age, although not demanding them as the logical issue of its own effort, at least did not appear to be essentially unfitted to produce them. *Lyrical Ballads* was printed at a time that had no deliberate artistic purpose of its own, but was, nevertheless, ripe for some new and striking manifestation of the spirit of man. The night had already lasted over-long. Wordsworth, it is true, came strangely early in the new day, but although the great voice in the dawn was unusual, it was not amazing.

These men, it would seem then, are to be looked for in a time that either demands them for its own sublimated utterance or is at least

negatively ready to receive them. Morris, however, whose genius was distinguished clearly by this universality, not only was not the essential figure of a great movement that had grown before and about him, but he came at a time that, far from demanding him as its natural fulfilment, was not even waiting to receive any new impression that might be struck upon it. When Tennyson had sounded his clearest music and Browning had wrought his subtlest perceptions into poetry, it was felt that the highest achievement of a new age had been reached. Then when the wonderful second summer of the romantic revival seemed to be exhausted, Swinburne gave to it a new term of strong life. Taking all the material that the new poetry had used since the first beginnings over a hundred years earlier, he blended it with his own temperament and gift of speech and, when men looked for no more than the quiet lapse into imitation and echoes, he showed it to be capable of an added and ringing significance that had been wholly unexpected. Taking language at the value that use had allotted to it, he not only retained the poetry that had already been found in those values but made it clear that no one had wrung the full measure of poetry from them. After this piling of crest above crest no further great expression could justly be looked

for until in due time a fresh impulse had been fostered to its full strength. The Victorian development of romantic poetry had reached its splendid final achievement, and quiet if not wholly songless years would have been the natural succession. And yet, at the very time that Swinburne was lending this last glory to the marvellous epoch of which Collins had been the herald, another poet was already announcing a new day with the authentic voice of a master. The eternal impulse that conspired with Morris's own vision to create his poetry is, perhaps, more difficult to define than in the case of any other poet. It certainly is not to be found in his own age, and although to say that he sought to continue the mediæval tradition may account for much in his literary form, it does not help very greatly in the understanding of his spiritual temper. The fact is that in its fundamental qualities Morris's art came as near as any art can do to being unaffected by any external impulse at all. His love for certain aspects of mediævalism did not prevent him from reaching far beyond them both in the construction and the philosophy of his art. The quality in mediæval art that chiefly attracted him was its direct simplicity, and this quality he took up into his own work. Instead of using words for their cumulative poetic value he threw poetry over

words that had hitherto gone naked. Apart from a few of his early poems and the use that he makes of models from time to time in verse forms, there is scarcely any evidence in the manner of his work that he had ever read any of the poetry before him. Reducing life to its simplest equation, he embodied it in an utterance as simple. But, in its interpretation of life, the world that he created was rather a world of the future than a world of the past, and it incorporates the essence of the spiritual and intellectual experience of the ages that had passed between, say, Chaucer and his own day. The intensity of his vision and the certainty with which he disentangled the essential from the ephemeral forced in him an utterance of a nature not unlike that of the earlier masters whom he was never tired of praising, but it is a mistake to suppose that he saw the history of the world shorn of five centuries. He was not misled into thinking that the fundamental meaning of life had changed, but he knew that man's power of adjusting his understanding to that meaning develops and is increased by the succession of prophetic voices, and in assimilating the cumulative growth of this power he was modern in the only worthy and valuable way. He applied a definitely modern faculty of analysis and definition to the permanent things of

life, and embodied it in an utterance that was clearly his own but coloured in the shaping by a mediæval rather than any other influence.

That such a poet should come was in itself not remarkable, but that he should come at such a moment was a phenomenon scarcely to be paralleled in literature. The current tradition of poetry when he was writing was not only hostile to his method, but in a negative way it had helped to make the age one peculiarly unfitted for his message. The eager selfishness of the new scientific thought had paid but little attention to the social ideal for which Morris stood. This neglect the poets had either flattered or, certainly, had not opposed, and the result was that at a time when poetry was passing through one of its most memorable epochs, the life of the people was suffused with vulgarity and meanness. Neither art nor science, whatever else they might be doing, realized that the basis of a wholesome national life is a delight among the people in their daily labour. The people did not discover this for themselves, and when Morris wanted to furnish his rooms he was forced to make his own chairs and tables. His work henceforward was to show his age its errors on the one hand in his social teaching, and on the other in his poetry and craftsmanship to announce its possibilities. This was a perfectly

natural result of the influence of the conditions that surrounded him upon his own creative impulse, but how that impulse came to birth among such conditions must remain a splendid perplexity. Morris's work was directed to certain ends by the requirements of his age, but his spirit was one to which the age had no logical claim. He came not in due time but by some large generosity of the gods.

When a great poet comes not unexpectedly but as the natural and full development of a long tradition, it is easy not only to estimate the positive value of his own achievement, but also to trace or even to predict his influence upon his successors. New poets will come, possessing some measure of genuine inspiration, and carry the tradition through to its quiet and often lovely close; they will take their honourable places about the few commanding figures, worthy of their kinship and proud of it. But when the great poet happens to be at the beginning instead of at the full day of an epoch, we can but await the event. Morris not only discovered a new world in his art, but he was allowed to explore and establish it. His word was not one of rumour and promise alone, but more or less of fulfilment. Strands of his influence have already been drawn through the art and life of his followers, but the work that

has been done in deliberate imitation of his is scarcely recognizable as such. A poet may imitate Tennyson with some success because he may inherit the same tradition that shaped Tennyson; the impulse is already in his blood towards the expression and temper of which his model is the consummation. But there is no such tradition behind Morris; his art was in a peculiar degree the creation of his own vision alone, and that is a thing which is beyond imitation. The new tradition that Morris himself began may or may not be carried along a clear line of progression, but it can only be taken up in its full compass by a poet that shall be not far short of Morris's own stature, and by the time he comes it is possible that the influence of the author of *Sigurd* may have done its work by operating indirectly through many new movements rather than through a direct succession of its own begetting. If this should happen, Morris's influence will be no less valuable a force in the world, but it is not unlikely that when the history of poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comes to be written, he will stand as a lonely titanic figure, excelled by none in the depth and range of his art, but outside any categorical lines of development.

About Morris's own attitude towards his art

a good deal of nonsense has been written. It appears, for example, that he once, in a moment of irresponsible conversation, said that poetry was 'tommy rot.' The remark had, of course, the exact value of all such small talk, but it is the kind of thing that has been solemnly advanced as a proof that he was primarily what is commonly called a man of action, who wrote poetry as a pleasant recreation. The truth is, of course, that Morris was a great artist, and knew that he was a great artist. That, to him, was the supremely important thing, because his art meant for him the sweetest and noblest life that he could perceive through his imagination. As a man of action he proved himself fully when occasion arose, but he undertook his propagandist work with reluctance and often turned from it in disgust. It was not that he was ever for a moment in doubt as to the excellence of the end at which such work was aiming, but that he knew that his own great work in the world, the work by which he could most effectually help it a little towards that end, was his art. To suggest that the man who created *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, *Sigurd* and *Love is Enough* had anything but the profoundest reverence for his art, and especially for the supreme expression of his art—poetry—would be a preposterous insult if it were not

ludicrous. Art was his gospel, and all his social teaching and activity were but an effort to bring his gospel to pass upon earth.

We can imagine a race that had attained a wisdom fuller than has yet been found, adopting one simple form of daily supplication. Always from the people's lips this prayer should go up, "Lord, give us character." Character. That is the supreme need of man, and it is simply the faculty of being himself and expressing himself in all the conduct of his life. He may not be a very great man, or a very wise man, or even a very good man, but if he be himself he may, in some measure he must, become these. There is, at the outset, the necessity of material opportunity for so being himself. One who is overworked, or employed all the while in degrading work, or insufficiently paid for his work, one who is, in short, driven, cannot be himself, just as the man who is denied the chance of working at all cannot be himself. But, given the material opportunity, the power of proving his character, of asserting his individuality, of being himself, is inherent in every man. And this Morris felt with the whole energy of his being. He saw men having no adventurousness in their own spirits, dulled by routine, and with their own wills bent and impoverished by the will of some one else, degraded

into mere echoes and reflections. He saw that the crying need of the world was character, and he sought to teach men that in bringing back joy to their daily work they would put their feet on the first step towards the only true dignity and pride of life. The satisfaction that comes of a piece of work truly done and having in it something of the soul of the worker was, to him, a holy thing. His own craftsmanship and manufacture were the expression of a man with this conviction; his imaginative writing was of a world peopled by such men. The spiritual exaltation of which I have spoken, the finer tissue of some mysterious emotional experience that is laid over the definable substance of poetry, is always in his work, translating its message into the imaginative terms of art; but the message itself is perfectly articulated, and it is one of the profoundest and most inspiriting that it has been given to any man to deliver. Other poets have given us courage to face a world fallen into uncharitable ways, or directed us to secluded places where we may forget the dust and trouble of a life that we must accept as an unfortunate necessity, or given good promise of revelation and comfort in a life to come; but none has ever announced so clearly as Morris the hope of life here upon earth. Cloistered quiet was an impossible state to this

man who so loved fellowship, and the world beyond death he was content to leave to its own proving. But he did not endeavour to encourage men to face the life that he knew was unwholesome and draining them of freedom and manhood ; he cried to them to destroy it and he showed them in his art the life that might be theirs in its stead.

The basis of Morris's social creed was an unchanging faith in the essential dignity of the nature of man. The trickeries and jealousies that beset our commercial phase of civilization he refused to accept as being fundamental in humanity, thinking of them rather as ill habits imposed upon humanity by some cruel sport of circumstance that made men forgetful of their own better instincts. He did not suppose that habits that had been slowly assimilated could be put off in a moment of violent reaction, but he never doubted if once men could be brought to consider the real purpose of traffic and social community, and so free themselves from a tyranny that endured only because part of its method was to carry its victims along in a continuous necessity of adjusting themselves to the immediate moment without allowing them to pause for reflection and see life in its completeness, that then these habits would inevitably be set aside. His desire always was that men

should at least be allowed to prove themselves freely. From the turbulent passions and sorrows inseparable from humanity he asked no escape, taking them gladly as the darker threads in the many-coloured web of our heritage, but he denounced fiercely the doctrine that, finding men forced into daily betrayal of themselves, blandly announced that here was proof of their radical meanness and unworth. For the people who told him that before he could hope for the world of his imagining he must change human nature, he had a fine contempt. That this cleaner life was realizable on earth, and that without any revolutionary excesses, he showed as clearly in the work of his own life as any one man could do. He conducted a large business enterprise profitably and in open competition, but he did not degrade labour in employing it. He accepted the normal conditions of society in public and family life, but he did not allow them to cramp or violate his own personality. He realized fully that a great social fabric is not constructed out of mere unreason, and he had no wish to destroy systems that had been evolved from perfectly sound impulses; the thing that he fought against with all his extraordinary power was their abuse. Principles of exchange and of labour for the common good were a necessary complement of his belief that

a man must get from his labour two things: joy in the work itself and the means whereby to live; but he knew that the real significance of these principles had been forgotten. His life was an active endeavour to impress it once again on the mind of the people, and in his poetry was the same endeavour embodied in creative imagination.

Writing of the northern stories Morris said, 'Well, sometimes we must needs think that we shall live again; yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnameable glory, and lived not altogether deedless? Think of the joy we have in praising great men, and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy: and this also we ourselves may give to the world.' It was curiously prophetic of that which we feel about Morris himself. His life, his art, the figure of the man, all fit into the outlines of a heroic story such as those that he loved. He gave, indeed, to the world in this manner and in large measure. And he added generously to the joy that we have in praising great men.

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